

**BAGA IDENTITY:
RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND
POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION
IN THE REPUBLIC OF GUINEA**

Ramon Sarro-Maluquer

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A note on orthography

Because International Phonetic Alphabet symbols are not widely installed in software equipments, the following decisions have been made in order to transcribe certain Baga Sitem words.

o= an open (back) o, as in organ

o= Front o, with no equivalent in English. Sounds almost like u.

e= e as in grey.

e= Open, back e as in “bet.”

i= letter schwa, central vowel, as a in “around.”

ng= voiced velar, as ng in “sing.”

The symbol c is used to transcribe the voiceless alveolar affricate sound, as ch in “church.”

Foreign words are always in italics, but not so names of Baga villages, to which these decisions also apply.

Chapter 1

Introduction: the meaning of “Baga”

1.1. Being Baga in Guinea

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the relevance of religious and political changes in the making of a people's identity. The people are called the Baga, they are mangrove rice farmers (Figures 1 and 2) and they live on the mangrove coast of today's Republic of Guinea (Map 3). As it will become apparent in subsequent chapters, they are split in at least eight different groups along the coast of Guinea, between Conakry in the south and the border with Guinea Bissau in the north. Because of this division, to view the Baga as, simply, one ethnic group may be misleading and gives rise to many more questions about ethnicity and ethnic boundaries than I am ready to deal with in my thesis. In fact, despite my interest in identity, the extent to which the Baga are *one* single ethnic group or a supra ethnic group (as the Mande are in other parts of West Africa or the Beti in Central Africa) is a question I am not addressing, since I do not think its answer would solve any specific historical or ethnographic problem other than provide a handy classificatory framework. The Baga themselves have no clear idea about it, and despite an increasing ethnicization of Guinean politics, the concepts of “ethnicity” and of “ethnic groups” as such do not seem to be relevant to any administrative or political level, while the concept of “natural region” certainly does¹. One may occasionally hear in Guinea that Baga are an ethnic group, but some Baga scholars view “Baga” as a supra ethnic label and speak of different Baga subgroups as “*ethnies*” (Camara 1990:65). Others claim groups that to me are clearly different to the Baga, such as their neighbours the Landuma and the Nalu, also belonged in the past to the “Baga group” because they shared a common “tradition.” Interestingly to me, these scholars often define this common tradition in religious or ritual terms (See Chapter Two).

¹ There are four natural regions in Guinea: the coast (*Guinée maritime*), the Fouta Djallon highlands (*moyenne Guinée*), the Mande Savannah (*haute Guinée*), and the rain forest (*Guinée forestière*). See Map Two.

In any case, this diversity of Baga (sub)groups, whether we call them *ethnies* or *subethnies*, gives rise in Guinea to an internal debate as to who the “real,” the “authentic,” the “purer” or, more than anything else, the “oldest” Baga are. We will see in Chapter Six that this debate takes place not only among different groups but even inside particular groups such as the Baga Sitem, the one I can claim direct knowledge of, as I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork among them.² In Guinea, as in many other parts of the world, to have a deep history with distant origins becomes a powerful legitimating tool, and while I for one strongly agree with Chabal’s and Daloz’s recent statement that “the fact that some ethnic groups were more creatively invented during colonial rule than others does not in and of itself make them any more or less genuine, or legitimate, than others” (Chabal and Daloz 1999:57), I do not think the Baga would agree (in fact, I do not think Guineans in general would). As we will see, part of their self-presentation consists of historical discourses about their “roots,” and they are particularly proud that their name is already present in 16th century Portuguese sources and that they can claim to be the oldest, and therefore the most “genuine” and most “legitimate,” group on the coast, irrespective of what we foreign political scientists and anthropologists may think at a meta-sociological, normative level.

I say this partly because at an ethical level my research will pose many problems, at least to my own conscience and to my feelings towards the Baga. I do not want to provide them with another text from which they can draw evidence of their deep history and thus become one of their “ethnic missionaries,” and I do not want either to prove their local historians wrong and to say that they invent their ethnohistory. I am more concerned with interpretations of history (both by local and by external researchers) than with its invention. I am interested in the ways interpretations of

² The name of the Baga Sitem group is differently spelt by researchers (*Baga Sitémou*, *Sitému*, *Stem*, *Stema*, etc.). The word “*sitem*” comes from their language, *cibaka citem*, meaning “the language of the old ones,” and the people are sometimes referred to as *abaka atem* (“the old Baga”). “*Sitemu*” is a Susu transformation of *citem*. Without being entirely satisfied, I decide to call the people Baga Sitem, as does Tina Ganong in her recent dissertation (Ganong 1998).

history and the making of a Baga category and of a community intermingle, and while I admit to strongly disagreeing with those who see the Baga as one single people with a unitary history, I also admit that mine are only hypotheses, and will feel satisfied if they give rise to a debate and to a scientific exchange of views (see Austen 1994 for a similar commitment to scientific debate).

The problem of the vagueness of the category of Baga is accompanied by another one: namely, that the Guinean coast, specially as one approaches Guinea Bissau, is one of the most multi-cultural regions of West Africa. Take just Boké Prefecture (the region that borders Guinea Bissau): apart from four clear-cut Baga groups (the Baga Fore, the Baga Pukur, the Baga Sitem and the Baga Mandori), each with internal divisions, there are several Nalu groups, several Landuma, Kokoli or Capi (the differences between these three groups are not at all clear to me), several Tenda-speaking groups, the Beafada (or Yola), the transhumant Fulbe in the dry season (and some Fulbe settlers as well), the Muslim groundnut growing Jakhanke (settled, mostly, among the Baga Sitem), the Mikhifore (who recognise the Baga Sitem as the owners of their land), scattered Wolofs in almost every single village of Boké Prefecture I know of, many Balanta hamlets in the Baga territory and almost one or two households of Bissauan Mandjaks in every Baga Sitem village, especially in the dry season when they come from Guinea Bissau to tap palm wine for the Baga (who, interestingly, drink but rarely tap). All this without counting, of course, the Susu, who are the biggest group on the coast and whose language has become the *lingua franca* of the Guinean coast and of huge areas of both Sierra Leone in the south and Guinea Bissau in the north. And without counting, too, an increasing migration of workers from the forest region (Toma and, especially, Kissi) to the Baga Sitem region, in particular to Kamsar, a major industrial port and city situated in what was the heart of the Baga mangroves (in fact, Kamsar city is a multi-cultural universe in its own right).

However, despite this multi-cultural situation, in today's Republic of Guinea nobody would doubt that the inhabitants of the coast *par excellence* are the Baga. They are,

as Stéphan Bouju so nicely put it, the “archetype” of coastal peoples (Bouju 1994 vol I:34): excellent fishermen, mangrove rice farmers, salt extractors, and ritual masters of the spirits that inhabit the tidal creeks. And this, in current Guinean politics, should not to be minimised. President Lansana Conté is a coastal man (albeit a Susu and not a Baga); Guinea’s first lady is a Baga Sitem who is often involved in cultural activities; the coast is undoubtedly the most promising zone of Guinea; the capital Conakry, situated on the coast, is said to be a Baga Kalum place; the bauxite-related mining city and port of Kamsar, until 1973 a small Baga Sitem village, is today, with the 4,000 employees of the *Compagnie des Bauxites Guinéennes* (C.B.G.) and its almost 50,000 inhabitants (including an important contingent of white people), one of the most developed areas of the whole Guinean territory. Rumour spreads in Guinea that a big aluminium factory (Kamsar’s factory doing only the treatment of the bauxite, but not the smelting of aluminium) is going to be built by some East European company, and that it will be built, again, on the Baga territory.

There is in Guinea a rather romantic mystique of Baganess, a mystique that has to do with the coastliness of the Baga, with their elusiveness within the mangroves, with their reputation as masters of occult forces. This mystique has to do both with their “autochthony” and with their internationally projected impressive culture. Take this as an example: on every single Guinean banknote, from the 25 Guinean Francs note to the 5,000 GF one, a Baga mask is depicted. This mystique, especially its politicisation, intermingles with the vagueness of the ethnic boundaries and with its instrumentalisation. Many Susu people in Conakry claim to be Baga Kalum or descendant of such, and while the northern Baga insist that the Baga Kalum of Conakry have lost their roots (if ever they had them), the fact is that even in the Guinea website (<http://www.guinee.net/>) can one read that the proper Baga group are the Baga Kalum of Ratoma and Kaporé (two districts of Conakry)³. Given on the one hand the regionalisation of Guinean politics and Lansana Conté’s faithful alliance of all coastal peoples, and given, on the other, this strong mystique of Baganess, I think that there is a political interest in leaving the geographic and ethnic boundaries of

³ cf. <http://www.guinee.net/geographie/bam/geohum.html#baga>

Baga vague. I suspect, based on a small ethnographic excursion into the hinterland, that for people in other regions, the difference between Baga and Susu is rather irrelevant (while the difference between coastal and non-coastal is not). The question of how many Baga people there are in Guinea, so often put to me, becomes virtually impossible to answer, as at any given moment thousands of Susus and other coastal people may claim that they, too, are also Baga.

So far I have been trying to defend my explicitly non-ethnic treatment of my subject matter (the Baga identity) by insisting on the nebulousness of the ethnic and semantic boundaries of “Baga.” Yet, this was only one side of my Guinean experience. The other side was that in fact it always struck me how strongly the Baga Sitem, the Baga Pokur and the Baga Fore, three groups overlapping each other and living between the prefectures of Boké and Boffa, did claim a territorial and cultural unity. I therefore became determined to find out the reasons why this was so, as well as the reasons why they, as opposed to other southern Baga groups (the Baga Kakissa, the Baga Koba, the Baga Kalum), have been less Susu-ized and have managed to maintain a rather distinct cultural identity in the multi-cultural region they inhabit. (The southern groups are in the main culturally, and certainly linguistically gone.) Again, I do not want to become an ethnic spokesman by supporting any claim that either the Baga Sitem, the Baga Pokur or the Baga Fore (or the three together) are the “purest” Baga or that they are the encapsulated fossil of what all coastal Baga were in the past. I simply do not know whether they are the representatives of anybody else apart from themselves. But I do know that they strongly try to define and express their common identity, and that this identity both vindicates the memory of pre-colonial times (although, as I will explain in Chapter Six, I would hesitate to say that the Baga are revitalising their culture) and minimises their links with other Baga groups to whom they are no longer (if ever they were) ritually, ethnically, or culturally linked.

To come to terms with ethnicity, then, I will say that while I agree with John Lonsdale’s seminal and influential idea that there are two opposed dimensions of ethnicity in Africa, namely what he calls “political tribalism” and “moral ethnicity”

(Lonsdale 1996a), I did not see that the two dimensions coincided in my case in a single political/ethnic community⁴. There is undoubtedly a politicisation of Baganess in Guinea, but not necessarily of the same community of Bagas I was living among, who, paradoxically, in terms of moral economy and moral ethnicity are much more strongly banded together than the huge and hypothetical Baga coastal group used in political discourses and symbols. Things may change in the future, and I know of several Baga Sitem politicians who fight for a “Baga Prefecture” in the Baga Sitem region of Boké (where Kamsar is located). If indeed things do change in this direction, I hope my ethnographic and historical work may help to understand where this group draws its powerful unity from and the historical processes that have made them be who they are in today’s Republic of Guinea.

I have subtitled my thesis “religious movements and political transformations” because it is my contention that the making of this community and identity has had to do with the memory (both intellectually elaborated and embodied in local practices) of having been a religiously different people; with their opposition to Fulbe culture (and therefore to Islam) well instrumentalised by Catholic missionaries (who were the first to draw maps of the *Bagatai* or Baga territory); with the political and religious upheavals the community suffered during colonial rule and, especially, during the processes of decolonisation. Finally, I think that today’s political context, namely the increasing decentralisation of Guinea accompanied by what Burnham has called a “regional reorientation of elites” (Burnham 1996:144), typical of West African democratizing processes, is providing new conditions of possibility for a (re)construction of the community, very much along highly culturalist notions about Baga identity, as we will see in Chapter Six.

⁴Lonsdale’s distinction seems to have revived discussions about ethnicity in Africa (see, for instance, its use by Geschiere 1996, Mamdani 1996, Berman 1998, Chabal and Daloz 1999). I must acknowledge, however, that I have become interested in this debate at a belated stage of my writing, and that my thesis was not written under these terms of reference, although I feel it probably can be read according to them.

1.2. The Baga in scholarship

The Baga are well known to the Western world first and foremost for their magnificent material culture. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a book on African art without at least a reference to the Baga. However, ethnographically speaking the Baga have represented quite a big gap in Upper Guinea Coast surveys⁵. On the one hand, their name, compared to that of their centralised neighbours such as the Nalu, the Landuma or the Susu, appears rarely in pre-colonial historical sources (see Hair 1997 for a review), which is in itself an interesting datum as it testifies to their lack of involvement in trade networks, something Baga intellectuals as well as local farmers may sometimes boast about. In fact, I strongly believe that this historical “purity” is part of the mystique of Baganess I was referring to in the previous section. On the other hand, no researcher carried out ethnographic or historical fieldwork in colonial times, in those years when Denise Paulme was living in Guinea among the Kissi of the forest regions and Marguerite Dupire among the Fulbe of the Fouta Djallon highlands. It is true that Denise Paulme and André Schaeffner visited the Baga in May 1954, and they wrote a few articles on them (Paulme 1956, Paulme 1957, Paulme 1958, Schaeffner 1962, Schaeffner 1964), but, while informative, they are far from being substantial ethnographic contributions. I understand that Paulme would have continued her work among them, but the anti-French regime after Independence (1958) made it impossible for her as well as for others to enter the Guinean territory.

As I will insist later, I do not intend to do a complete review of Baga sources. However, for the specific colonial time I feel I must say that the often repeated notion that Paulme was either the only or the first French ethnographer to carry out fieldwork among the Baga in that period is a bit unfair to other French researchers.

⁵ “Upper Guinea coast” is the West African coast between Gambia in the north and Sierra Leone/Liberia in the south. The concept was used by Walter Rodney in his classic historical survey (Rodney 1970) and it has become an accepted discrete region ever since. Whether such a coast is a unified historical or cultural area is not going to affect my arguments on the Baga. I use it as a purely geographical designation, as well as a more or less unified topic in African studies.

Physical anthropologist Léon Pales visited the Baga in the 1940s and wrote very detailed accounts of their food habits, with inspired reflections about their history too (Pales 1947, Pales 1954). Geographer Jacques Champaud was the author of an ethnographically sound report on the coastal populations and on their relations with the transhumant Fulbe, based on his own field research (Champaud 1957). *Musée de l'Homme* researcher Béatrice Appia as well as art historian Bogumil Holas (then curator at the *Musée d'Abidjan*) wrote seminal articles on Baga art and ritual based on first-hand research (Appia 1943, Appia 1944, Holas 1950). Geographer C. R. Hiernaux conducted research among the Baga Sitem of Kawass and produced a very detailed demographic report (Hiernaux 1956). Colonial administrator Philip Gennet wrote an interesting article on the Baga house based on his own research in Boké (Gennet 1949), and agronomist and historian of African rice Roland Portères wrote on Baga history using the presence of the *Oriza glaberrima* species among the Baga Sitem and the Baga Fore as evidence of their migrations (Portères 1955, cf. also Portères 1965).

But apart from all these sporadic short-term researchers, the greatest bulk of first-hand ethnographic data on colonial Baga is to be found not in these researchers' writings, but in Catholic missionary sources (a body largely neglected by researchers), notably in the works of father Raymond Lerouge (the first bishop of Conakry) and father Marius Balez (who was Father Superior at the Mission of Katako from 1931 to his death in 1973), both of whom lived among the Baga and wrote extensively on them. (Lerouge, who was exceedingly productive, dedicated about a hundred pieces only to the Baga.) From 1966, following an expulsion of all non-African missionaries by Sékou Touré, Marius Balez became the only European Christian missionary to be exceptionally allowed to stay in Guinea; he died in the Baga Sitem village of Katako in 1973. Father Arsène Mell (died in Boffa in 1921), whose tomb in the Mission of Boffa has become a pilgrimage site attracting people from the whole Guinean territory, but mostly Baga, is also a fascinating early colonial source on the Baga. He was the first missionary, to my knowledge, to encourage his ecclesiastic authorities to send missionaries into the mangroves where the Baga lived,

as he felt that the Baga, being “threatened” by Islam, were much more eager to be evangelized than the Susu and other peoples living in big centres such as Conakry or Boffa town. Although he never published his writings, fragments of them can be read in two detailed biographies (Lerouge 1927, Piacentini 1935), and his letters and journals are located in the archives of the *Pères du Saint-Esprit* in Chevilly Larue (France)⁶.

The action of the *Pères du Saint-Esprit* (sometimes called “The Holy Ghost Fathers” in English), was in Guinea particularly useful for us because of their interest in local history, in “*la petite histoire*” (small history), as they would call it. Undoubtedly, this was due to the seminal influence of Lerouge, whose interest in local history and in, let us say, “pagan” issues antagonised him with his ecclesiastic authorities in Europe, as Monsignor G. de Milleville, bishop of Conakry between 1954 and 1966, now retired in Chevilly Larue, explained to me in May 1996. Between 1926 and 1939 the fathers edited a monthly journal called *La Voix de Notre-Dame*, which was meant to document Guinean customs and stories that they felt were bound to disappear. The Baga, a group the missionaries had become very interested in since 1898 (there are no records of any previous encounter between Catholic missionaries and Baga people prior to this date) are particularly well documented in *La Voix de Notre-Dame*, where some fifty articles deal directly with them. (They are mostly written by Lerouge and by Balez, sometimes using different pseudonyms.) Another body of literature, again written mostly by Lerouge, Mell and Balez, are the anonymous reports sent to the annual *Bulletin de la Congrégation des Pères du Saint-Esprit*. Lerouge’s unpublished manuscripts are again invaluable, especially so the two massive collections *Miscelanea quae, auditis senioribus, de Guineae gallicae locis et focus, ego senescens retuli* (started in 1942, when he retired to France) and *Quand la Guinée s'appelait les Rivières du Sud* (undated), as well as his annual notebooks (*Carnets de Route des tournées pastorales*) that he kept filling with field data and with very

⁶*Archives des PP. du St.-Esprit* 193 A 13: “Letters du Père Mell.” Cf. also the long sections of both the *Journal de la Communauté du Sacré-Coeur de Boké* (box 674 A) and *Journal de la Communauté de St. Joseph de Boffa* between 1897 and 1921 hand-written by him.

detailed sketches between 1911 and 1942 (although unfortunately many are missing in the archives)⁷. Recently, several of the missionaries' sources dealing with the Baga have been put together in the first volume of the history of the Catholic Church in Guinea edited by Father Gérard Vieira (Vieira 1992, cf. also Vieira 1990).

Of course, to this Catholic material it would only be fair to add some Protestant sources. The Church Missionary Society and the West Indian Society were active on the coast of Guinea, and most notably around the port of Boffa, since the early 19th century, and by 1850s and 1860s several W.I.S. missions were built along the Rio Pongo (on whose right bank Boffa city is located). There have been different studies on these missions (Laughton 1949, Mouser 1971, Vassady 1972, Jakobsson 1972, Sorry 1975, Jones 1986) and some texts written by Protestant missionaries contain fascinating data on the Baga of Boffa and of those living between Boffa and Conakry (cf. most notably the vivid account of bishop Barrow in Barrow 1900). But I have consciously neglected this area and have not conducted any archival research on Protestant missionaries, first and foremost because the presence of Protestant missions on the Guinean coast appears to be minimal when compared with Catholic ones (and it has been so since the 1870s and 1880s, with the foundations of the Catholic missions of Boffa and of Boké and with the definitive French hegemony of the territory). While a proper history of the coast, and especially of Boffa, would have to consider the Protestant action and the reasons behind its quick decline, I found that in order to assess the transformations suffered by the Baga groups in today's prefectures of Boké and Boffa, such research would not be relevant.

Ethnographically speaking, it was not until the mid 1980s, after the death of Sékou Touré (1984), that proper fieldwork by foreign researchers in Guinea could be resumed, and more recent information about the Baga came to our knowledge. The pioneering work of art historian Frederick Lamp deserves special mention. Lamp

⁷Lerouge's unpublished material is located in the *Archives des PP. du St.-Esprit*. Box 269 A and B ("*Fonds Bernier*"). Box A contains his unpublished articles, B his priceless *Carnets de route* (recently typed up by a retired missionary).

carried out several visits between 1985 and 1992, the outcome of which was a series of very informative publications on Baga art and culture (Lamp 1986, Lamp 1988, Lamp 1992, Lamp 1996a) culminating in the first proper ethnography of the Baga (Lamp 1996b), which Lamp produced to accompany the art show he organised in the US in 1996. While dealing primarily with art history, the book also contains detailed ethnographic elements, as well as a powerful “dramatic” historical narrative. His challenging, sometimes problematic, but always ethnographically supported views on Baga history and culture will be discussed in different parts of my thesis. Roger Botte, a leading figure in Guineanist studies, also conducted substantial historical research on the coastal regions, including several months of participant observation among the Mikhifore, and wrote a seminal historical article on the slave trade of the Fuuta Jaloo (the Fulbe pre-colonial state situated at some 200 kms. away from the coast, in the Fouta Djallon highlands) in which special attention was paid to the regional system between the Fuuta Jaloo and the coastal peoples (Botte 1991). French-Guinean art historian Marie-Yvonne Curtis also wrote on Baga and Nalu art since the mid/late 1980s (Curtis 1988, Curtis 1991), when she was based in Guinea collecting material for her PhD thesis on Baga and Nalu ritual art (Curtis 1996). But it was well into the 1990s that new ethnographers, linguists, geographers and historians started to conduct research and write extensively on the Baga. French anthropologist Stéphan Bouju spent two years at the ORSTOM centre in Conakry and wrote a three-volume thesis on coastal fishing techniques with particular attention to the Baga (Bouju 1994). Unfortunately, he often based his assertions on the Baga living around Conakry and unduly projected them to the Baga living on other parts of the Guinean coast that he obviously did not know as well as those of the south (and in this sense, his thesis complements mine, since I have ignored the people he was living among). While consulting for the French-Guinean *Projet d'appui à l'action villageoise* based in Kamsar, geographers François Ségala and Laurent Beaumont wrote two thorough reports on the rice farming system of the Baga and other peoples of Boké Prefecture (Beaumont 1991, Ségala 1991). In the same period, some other geographers were attracted to the mangrove rice system and continued the broad regional analysis that links the Baga to other mangrove rice

farmers of the Upper Guinea coast (Balanta in Guinea Bissau, Jola in Senegal), a regional comparison already suggested by Olga Linares in her 1981 seminal article (Linares 1981, Cormier-Salem [ed.] 1994, Cormier-Salem 1995).

Linguistic research on the Baga languages started in the 1950s, but it also has been “revitalized” very recently. In Greenbergian classificatory terms, the Baga belong to the West Atlantic group, a subgroup of the Niger-Congo languages, and particularly to the West Atlantic subgroup David Dalby (Dalby 1965) called the *Mel* languages (because of the presence in all of them of the root *-mel* or *-mer* to designate “tongue”). The West Atlantic group, by and large rather under-researched, has very little if any internal unity other than being constituted by rather minority class languages (with the exception of Fulfulde) on the periphery of Mande-speaking regions, and not even the languages in its subgroup *Mel* appear to be particularly close to each other; Africanist linguists are eager to have more data on them in order to know this group better, or even to assess whether they are a group at all. While the Baga had caught the attention of previous linguists (Dalby 1965, Wilson 1962 and 1963, Sapir 1971) or historians interested in historical linguistics (Hair 1966, 1967), no consistent body of linguistic scholarship (grammars, dictionaries, word-lists or phonetic descriptions) was available before I started my fieldwork. French ethno-linguist Maurice Houis had written several articles on Baga language and people (see Houis 1950 and 1953, which I found the most useful of them) that, if handled carefully, are valuable for their lexical contribution, and since the 1970s several Guinean linguists have been writing dissertations on Baga language (Bangoura 1973, Bah 1978, Bah 1979, Sané 1980, Kalissa 1984, Soumah 1990). By and large the most innovative of these is the work on Baga Sitem phonetics written by Professor Thomas Diassi (Diassi 1974), who, incidentally, was to be my first teacher in the language and one of my first contacts at the University of Conakry. As with their art and ethnography, linguistic research started to advance in the early 1990s. French ethno-linguist Marie-Paule Ferry-Retel conducted field research among different Baga groups in 1992, and although to the best of my knowledge she has never published her material, she did write it up and kindly shared it with other researchers,

and certainly with me (see the unpublished paper Ferry nd., c.1995, for a good synthesis of her material and hypotheses). German linguist Erhard Voeltz, a specialist in Niger-Congo linguistics, opened in 1994 a *Centre d'Études des Langues Guinéennes* at the University of Conakry and published, among other linguistic topics, on the different Baga languages (Voeltz 1996a, Voeltz 1996b, Voeltz *et al.* 1997); American linguist and Protestant missionary Tina Ganong, who is currently living among the Baga Sitem, wrote a Master's Dissertation in linguistics at the University of Texas (Arlington) on Baga Sitem morphology and narrative discourse (Ganong 1998). Last (and probably least) I did also contribute to this linguistic exploration by making available a series of Baga Sitem questionnaires (Celag and Greenberg) and texts that I had done prior to the arrival in Guinea of either Voeltz or Ganong in collaboration with Aboubacar Camara, a modest contribution to the *corpus* of Baga linguistics that Ganong used and positively appreciated in her own Master's dissertation (Ganong 1998:7), and that Voeltz incorporated in the Baga Sitem/French/English dictionary he is editing (Voeltz *et al.*, in progress).

Historical research on the Upper Guinea coast has also benefited from the reopening of Guinea in the 1980s and has also increased our knowledge of the Baga. In fact, things could not be better, as the region holds amongst its scholars some of the best Africanist and African historians. Two of the "founding fathers" of Upper Guinea coast history, Professors Paul Hair and Bruce Mouser, who had been writing on the Guinean coast (but not specifically on the Baga) since the 1960s and 1970s have recently joined the Baga revival and written specifically on them (Hair 1997, Mouser 1997), both of them admittedly motivated by Lamp's work on their art and by the show he put together in 1996. Roger Botte's historical work on the Fuuta Jaloo state has already been mentioned and we await his future articles specifically dealing with the coast-Fuuta relations. One of West Africa's most noteworthy historians, Guinean Djibril Tamsir Niane, has been collecting material on the Baga since the mid 1960s, when he was a professor of history at the University of Conakry. A proper edition of his *Enquêtes orales en pays бага (1966-1970)* has not been published as yet,

although photocopies of parts of it circulate among scholars (cf. Wondji 1985:36 for the exact title of Niane's unpublished work), and since the early 1980s he has been publishing articles about the Baga (Niane 1982), or with references to the Baga (Niane 1997), based on his 1960s field research.

Having started this section by stating that the Baga represent a gap in Africanist literature, I also would like to say that, as the reader may have already realised, this needs some serious qualifications. It is true that proper ethnographic, linguistic or historical fieldwork was not carried out during colonial rule by Western researchers. But it is also true that one finds much more written about the Baga than one would first be led to believe. In 1996-1997, while holding an ERASMUS scholarship in Paris, I became stubbornly determined to find and cite every single article dealing with the Baga, searching through all sorts of colonial, missionary, ethnographic, art and other journals and books. I gave up my search when I had found more than two hundred references, much more than what I had imagined, realizing mine was an endless endeavour, especially if I had to start searching in Portuguese sources as well. I passed the citations on to Roger Botte, who was compiling and editing a complete bibliography of Guinea (in progress).

A complete survey of the literature on the Baga would need to review all these hundreds of articles written in colonial times, together with several dozens of pre-colonial sources (Portuguese, French, Dutch, English, Spanish) and hundreds of unpublished reports from different archives, without counting almost a hundred dissertations presented in Guinean universities on the Baga or on the history of the Guinean coast, some of them indeed useful since they are based in genuine oral historical fieldwork. But such a review would become a thesis in its own right, bigger than this one. Suffice it to say that those I found relevant to different aspects of my own study are going to be found in different parts of my thesis. For those dealing with Baga art, especially with the huge *nimba* headdress (Figure 7), I have already reviewed them in an article I co-authored with M.-Y. Curtis (Curtis and Sarro 1997),

and Lamp of course has done an important job in bringing to our knowledge some obscure sources in the excellent bibliography in his recent book (Lamp 1996b).

I have mentioned earlier that a body of the recent literature on the Baga comes from Guinean scholars. In fact, this is not in itself new. Since the early 1970s a vast amount of *Mémoires de diplôme de fin d'études supérieures* (four-year first degree dissertations) by Guinean students has been produced both in Conakry and in Kankan (see Botte 1993 for an excellent compilation). A high number of them deal with the Baga in particular or with the history of the Guinean coast in general. To my knowledge, the first one on the Baga was written by Professor Bappa Diop (Diop 1971), but it has today become unavailable. Luckily enough, part of his findings were reproduced in the dissertation that his female student Rouguyatou Diallo wrote in 1974 (Diallo 1974). Sékou Béka Bangoura wrote an excellent one on Baga Sitem religious practices (Bangoura 1972) and Blèz (or Blaise) Bangoura another one on traditional education equally based on the Baga Sitem (Bangoura 1974). Abdoulaye Tyam's study of funerary rituals is well done and full of interesting historical and ethnographic data on the Baga Fore (Tyam 1975), and Fodé Bangoura, who has recently written on Baga Koba land tenure (Bangoura 1991), wrote a very detailed history of this Baga group based on his own fieldwork in the region of Taboria (Bangoura 1975). Damayé Touré wrote his dissertation on the industrial city of Kamsar, thus documenting the importance of this industrial port and city only a few years after its building (Touré 1978). This list is not exhaustive, as the number of *mémoires* relevant to Baga studies is indeed huge. More titles will be brought to the reader's notice in different parts of the thesis. I will just mention here, to finish with a very special case, the dissertation on rice farming written by the late agronomist Théodore Camara (a Baga Sitem from Bukor) long before the Guinean ones, and presented as partial fulfilment of his D.É.A. degree in agronomy at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (VI^e section) in 1966 (Camara 1966). This is a very fine thesis, and had he not been a victim of Sékou Touré's repressive regime (he was imprisoned in 1971 and died shortly after), he would have surely become a leading figure in Baga scholarship.

All together, the presence of the Baga in the written text is so huge and unfortunately so scattered that I doubt any researcher has so far been able to bring it all together. Certainly neither Lamp, Bouju, Curtis (all three of them having conducted excellent source searching) nor myself can make any boast of having carried out a complete literature review on the Baga. But certainly what a thesis in social anthropology bases its original data on is not other authors' writings, but the quality and quantity of field data collected through participant observation. Therefore, in the next section of this introduction I am going to describe my research in Guinea, since I think the quality of my data could hardly be understood without describing my personal involvement among (and some times against) the Baga people.

1.3. Secrets and lies: The social conditions of fieldwork

In April-May 1992 I visited Guinea for the first time. The research objective of that brief visit was to conduct some participant observation on a Catholic pilgrimage to the city of Boffa, once a major West African trading port and today one of West Africa's major Catholic sites (Boffa harbours one of the most ancient Catholic missions in Africa, founded in 1876). During that visit, whose agenda was really to find a feasible PhD topic in Guinea, and particularly on issues related to religious change, I met a few Baga young Christians who attended the pilgrimage. To meet Baga people in 1992, when most Western scholars simply would assume, following Denise Paulme's dull predictions, that all Baga were Islamized and Susu-ized, was close to a discovery⁸. Ethno-linguist Marie-Paule Ferry, who had been interviewing the same Baga man I first met only a few months before my visit to Guinea, was also puzzled to find out that there were still Baga speakers in Guinea. Noticing the importance of the Baga youths in the cult and curious about the fact that, against

⁸ In her articles, Denise Paulme regretted the high level of anomie observed among the Baga, and she anticipated that the group would break up, that people would abandon their customs and language and that the hegemonic Susu group would just take over. Anomie there was, but the history was to be different to the one she predicted, as we are going to see in this thesis.

scholars' predictions, there *were* still Baga in Guinea, I became very interested in them and after the pilgrimage, at the kind invitation of a young pilgrim, I went to Katako and decided I wanted to study more about this interesting people.

A year later, in April 1993, having submitted my PhD proposal on religious changes among the Baga and having been awarded a PhD grant from the Catalan Government, I went back to Guinea and started my fieldwork on the Baga. My stay in Guinea lasted for two years, although I took two short breaks in Europe and spent quite a long time in Conakry, learning the Baga language at the *Centre d'Études des Langues Guinéennes* (see below).

Thanks to a letter written by Fulgence, a Baga friend I had met in 1992, I was accepted in the Baga Sitem village of Mare, in a household run by Fulgence's classificatory father Arafan Bangoura, from the lineage of *Dicola*, and three of his wives. The house location, on the very edge of the village, was any anthropologist's dream: neither too close to the noisy centre nor so far away from it as to be unaware of what was going on in the village.

Two days after my arrival, Arafan introduced me to his classificatory son Kande Bangoura, a *Dicola* married man in his early forties. Kande was the male representative of the *danapa* (generation, age group) to which Arafan and his *Dicola* brothers (who were in their sixties) judged I should be fitted. Kande was a very intelligent man who, despite a lack of formal education, had managed to learn French to a surprisingly good degree. He was my first companion in my walks around what they called the *Dabaka* or, in Susu, *Bagatai* ("Baga country"), my first technical guide in mangrove rice growing, my first fishing companion in the tidal creeks, my first pelican hunting companion ever in my life and certainly my first drinking companion in the Baga *kiwal* (pl. *ciwal*), the hut or just glade in the forest where men meet to drink palm wine, today normally run by strangers from Guinea Bissau, either Balantas or Mandjacs.

Looking back in retrospect, Kande was both the best and the worst thing that could have happened to me at that early stage. The best because he was a highly respected man in all Baga villages, he was very concerned for the well-being of the *Dicola* and was the arranger of every marriage and intermediary for social problems in which the lineage was involved. Hanging around with him always made me feel very proud of being ‘his *witabo*’ (*witabo*, pl. *atabo*: white person) and made me aware of many subtle aspects of Baga ways of life, even if he was not very articulate in explaining the rationale behind them. The worst because he was a very busy man, a married man, a father of five, both fisherman and rice farmer, and charged with much social responsibility on top of all this. He had no time to dedicate to the ethnographer, no special motivation in detaching himself from his local everyday life in order to explain things to me, and he had a serious drink problem -or, rather, a drinking habit that became a serious problem for me. Whenever I told Kande, sometimes anxiously, that I *had to* do some research, he would agree with me. “Yes,” he would say, ‘this afternoon we are going to visit the chief of such and such lineage and discuss with him the history and structure of their lineage.’ But then, once again, Kande would only take me to the *kiwal*, where he and other men would start to drink massive amounts of either palm wine, adulterated Western drinks, or *karakara*, an illegal beverage made out of fermented rice. More often than not they would get terribly drunk and would start to argue loudly in Baga or Susu, either leaving me out or blatantly making fun of Kande’s *witabo*.

These depressing meetings in the *kiwal* seemed by and large to be as far away from any sensible research as I could possibly be, and I felt that time was flying and I was getting nowhere. Months later, however, I understood how suspicious people were of having me among them, and had I not made the effort to be “one of them” and let time and wine flow smoothly I would have never managed to get any research done at all. But this, I insist, is something I only knew much later, when people would tell me how much they had appreciated that I liked palm wine (which in fact I never did) and enjoyed chewing kola nuts (which I did, but only after three or four months of disgustingly *pretending* I did). The old El-Hadj Halassan told me almost a year after

my arrival in Mare, that I was wrong to think that I was studying the Baga, for the truth was the Baga were studying me. And that was not a compliment, for at that stage he was still very reluctant to accept me sitting in his veranda asking him questions about the village. Eventually he was to become a better informant, although I have the feeling that he, like many others, always thought I had no right to know as much as I wanted to.

In the early months of my fieldwork everything was highly ambiguous. In Guinea, the Baga are reputed to be extremely hospitable, and indeed they were hospitable towards me. Only a few months after my arrival, the *Dicola* were seriously telling me that should I want my own house instead of living in Arafan's, they would build one for me and give me some rice field as well. The hospitality was pervasive, and often misleading. In fact, whenever I tried to carry out any fieldwork (as opposed to just being invited to eat rice in different houses), even among people I felt relatively close to, doors would close. People would not answer any questions, they kept on referring to their "secrets," and it was impossible for me to know whether a specific area of information would fall into the category of "secret" or not. In consequence I reduced my efforts to the minimum, which in practical terms meant to restrict myself to language training and to letting Kande take me from one household another, and from one *kiwal* to another.

The reluctance of people to help me and their suspicion about me were quite clear, and my reaction was to become more inhibited and more reluctant to break the pervasive law of silence. Despite the superficial hospitality, the mangoes, coconuts, kola nuts, palm wine and bush meat that every day some one or another would give to me, I got in my first months of fieldwork so many negative reactions to my presence I could have easily given up my fieldwork, and I do remember considering it seriously.

On one occasion, Antoine Camara, a Mare *ressortissant*, came from Conakry to his village⁹. He was surprised to find out that there was an anthropologist in the village. He came to visit me and to tell me that Baga was a very secretive culture (not that he was revealing anything new to me at that point), that nobody in the villages would help me and that he felt sorry for me, knowing that I would not get away with it. We will hear more about Antoine's attitude towards me at the end of the section.

On another occasion, in Katako, I asked a local teacher about Kakilenc, a Baga Sitem village about which I was always told with an aura of mystery. He told me that that was a very dangerous village, that its inhabitants had many "secrets" and that should I want to go there, he would be happy to lend me his canoe, only he would not do it because he knew he would never see his canoe again, meaning, of course, that I would be somehow "eliminated" by Kakilenc's mysterious people. Of course that was sheer threat, but at the time and given my general impression that I was not particularly a welcome stranger, this kind of attitude did not help very much.

On yet another occasion, another man from Katako, who is in fact very respected for his knowledge of things Baga, came to Arafan's house, probably to check me out. Again, he told me that nobody had ever done a proper ethnography of the Baga because of the "secrets," and again he told me he felt sorry for me. Yet, despite his sympathy, he also felt he had to give me a lesson, and as he was leaving the house, he asked me: "by the way, do you know what the word "Baga" means?" My answer was negative (and still is, in case the reader wonders). "Well" he said, "give it up. You will never find it out; we the Baga are very proud of our secrets." Incidentally, El-Hadj Halassan, in his insightful if always rather superficial explanations, also told me once that the meaning of "Baga" was the highest of the secrets taught in the sacred bush. (The sacred bush is where secret knowledge seems to literally take

⁹ *Ressortissants* are natives to a village who live in Conakry (or elsewhere). *Ressortissants* who live together in Conakry regularly meet, and their actions are very important for the development of their village. Although one is sometimes tempted to translate this word as "elites," I prefer to use the French word, as I cannot think of any English satisfactory equivalent.

place; all too often, things Baga did not want to discuss with me “belonged to the sacred bush”; I will deal with this particular “locality” of knowledge in due course).

Things started to improve when after a few months (at the end of November 1993), and shortly after a small break in Europe, I met Aboubacar Camara. Aboubacar (in his mid 30s) was a native of Bukor, a village that I had already visited with Kande and that, similarly to Kakilenc, people always referred to with some mystery and fear for reasons I will reveal later. However, he was very much part of an interesting category of people Guineans call “*aventuriers*” (adventurers, “globe-trotters”) and, having returned from a four-year period in Dakar, he was then working in the informal sector of Kamsar, making mud bricks without much success and trying to re-introduce himself into the Baga community, with all the difficulties ex-“*aventuriers*” normally experience. I met him in Mare, in a marriage ceremony between a young Christian woman of the *Dicola* with a man from another lineage in Mare. Aboubacar, a close friend of the groom (who, incidentally, was also a recently re-settled “*aventurier*” for whom his family, like Aboubacar’s later, had arranged a marriage), was silently sitting next to me. Suddenly, before even introducing himself, he started to ask me the Baga word for different objects in the courtyard where we (but not he) were drinking the palm wine that the groom’s lineage were presenting to the *Dicola*. Whenever I could not find the right answer to his questions, he would give it to me together with a nice elaboration on the object and on its uses. That was probably the first time I became an observer rather than a participant of sorts. All of a sudden Aboubacar had gone beyond his linguistic exam into a detailed explanation of what we were doing there. I was particularly happy about the fact that he was not drinking at all, as in a few hours all the rest of the group were drunk (all except my father Arafan, one of the few strict Muslims in Mare). I asked Aboubacar whether he wanted to come next morning to Arafan’s house and work with me on my linguistic questionnaires and word lists.

During the next few days Aboubacar and I worked together on my questionnaires, word lists and early texts. I was really surprised at Aboubacar’s linguistic

competence in Baga Sitem. He was able to bring into discussion many more words than any of the other men I had been working with, and could describe subtle differences between words that other people had simply given to me as synonyms. He was also very good at correcting people (even much older than himself) who were using Susu words (which is an ever-increasing tendency), or those who used Baga words without respecting the class correspondences. Because Aboubacar was from Bukor, where the Baga Sitem spoken is quite different to that of Mare, he was also very good at pointing out and describing dialectal variations, since there are five Baga Sitem dialects. To his competence in his language it was added a very good knowledge of Susu, a good knowledge of Maninkakan (the Mande language spoken by the Malinke) since he had been living in Kankan in his youth, a good working knowledge of Fulfulde (the Fulbe's language), a very good knowledge of Wolof learnt in his four years spent in Dakar, and of course an excellent French. Aboubacar was a good raconteur, but not an overwhelming one. In fact, because of his general indolence, and because of his "liminal" status (especially if compared with the intense social involvement of Kande), it took me quite a long time to decide that he was to become my field assistant. At first I only wanted to work with him on language, and that was the arrangement for at least a month, when Aboubacar would come to our house once or twice a week, provided I brought the kola nuts and the cigarettes for the session and his taxi fare from and to Kamsar. He (like Kande) never asked for any money, but that was not an exception, as Baga are by and large a very "proud" people and very few of them ever gave me that kind of problem. Yet, when he eventually became my assistant, I judged I had to make it worth his while (especially because he had to give up his brick making), and we made an arrangement.

The situation was at times tense because Kande felt that I was betraying him by being all the time with Aboubacar. The good news was that Aboubacar's lineage in Bukor (the *Dingonc*) was a corresponding lineage to the *Dicola*, which meant that he was entitled to be considered as a *Dicola* whenever he was in Mare. On these bases the jealousy was smoothly ironed away; I was still a "belonging" of the *Dicola*, and my

new companion was still one of the *Dicola* and had the rights to spend time with me, to eat Arafan's rice, to sleep in the house and to become my "buddy." Had he not been a *Dingonc*, our friendship would have been much more embarrassing *vis-à-vis* my adoptive household. The reader will have to restrain his or her curiosity as to what exactly a "corresponding lineage" is until Chapter Three.

Seven months after I had started my fieldwork, all I knew about the Baga was that they were very different from any preconception I could have had before my fieldwork. My research proposal, based on a short 1992 Christian experience and a very scant literature review, would have been, if read in the field, meaningless. I did not know, for instance, that in 1957 a Muslim leader by the name of Asekou Sayon had been in the area and had started an iconoclast rebellion among the Baga, burning their sacred objects and cutting down the sacred bushes of many Baga villages, and I did not know that manhood initiations with six month periods in the sacred bush (a rather typical characteristic of Upper Guinea coast societies) had been given up since the 1950s. This iconoclast revolution and the fact that initiations had been abandoned were elements that I had not anticipated, and that yet structured the whole of Baga social life, and especially its age structure. It made people who had been initiated in the 1950s into elders (*abiki*) and those who had not been initiated remained 'children' (*awut*). This accounted for the fact that Kande, for instance, was in his mid-forties and married but was still considered to belong to the *awut* category by the *abiki* of Mare such as Arafan and his classificatory brothers. To this complex age situation and to the iconoclast revolution, a third unpredicted element was intimately linked: the impenetrable secrecy associated to the initiatory male spirit *amanco ngopon* (better known in Guinea and abroad by his Susu name *kakilambe*). Nothing about *amanco ngopon* could be discussed. In fact, the only thing I was revealed about *amanco ngopon* was that he existed. Every Baga, whether young or elder, whether initiated or not, knew that *amanco ngopon* was somewhere; that up to 1952 he used to come (from the Fouta? From the sea?; interpretations differed) in a massive masquerade (in which *amanco ngopon* himself appeared in the form of a 20

metre high raffia construct¹⁰) performed every 12 years or so to put an end to the six months seclusion of the boys in the sacred bush (part of the initiation into manhood); that despite the iconoclast revolution, *amanco ngopon*'s head was kept somewhere in the village; and, unfortunately for me, that *amanco ngopon* would punish whomever would tell me too much. This much everybody knew. The only thing about which people had different views was the question of whether *amanco ngopon* would or would not ever come back to the *Bagatai*. I will dwell on this debate when discussing issues of 'folklorisation' and reification of tradition in Chapter Six.

What people knew about *amanco ngopon*, other than these general issues, was so far away from obtainable that I gave up trying to know anything. On many occasions I had to promise my informants, before starting an interview, that *amanco ngopon* was a topic I was not going to ask about. I had to lie and say that I was not interested in that. In fact, let me not lie to you, *amanco ngopon* was the most interesting thing about the Baga, and the Baga knew it well; I strongly think that the dense secrecy around *amanco ngopon* (more than *amanco ngopon* himself, wherever he was) was their most valuable "symbolic capital," in the charismatic sense that Bourdieu has given to this term (for a recent definition, see Bourdieu 1994:189-192), and quite an important element of the Baga mystique I was referring to in the first section of this chapter.

In any case, since *amanco ngopon* structured all kinds of social interactions and flows of knowledge, I did not really have to ask about him in order to observe his structural role in Baga thought and social life. The most frustrating thing was not that knowledge about *amanco ngopon* himself was unavailable, but that *amanco ngopon* was responsible for making other subjects, more relevant to my study, *also* secret. The phrase "this has been buried by *amanco ngopon*" (and things buried by *amanco*

¹⁰In his book on Baga art, Frederick Lamp has reproduced an impressive sketch of the high *amanco ngopon* done by a Catholic missionary in the 1920s (Lamp 1996b:59). Although Lamp attributed the sketch to an anonymous missionary (and suggested, on unclear grounds, that the author could be father Feuillet), I have no doubts that the author of the sketch was in fact Raymond Lerouge. Lerouge himself recalled having done a sketch of *amanco ngopon* in an article he wrote (albeit anonymously) in *La Voix de Notre-Dame* (Anonym 1930:14).

ngopon were not to be dug up by the hand of man) was on the lips of my informants any time I tried to know about slavery, lineage origins, any kind of ritual or masquerade, problems between specific lineages, and so forth and so on. And whenever people were open to me about these things (especially at late stages of my fieldwork), I was often told them more as a friend than as a researcher, and certainly not when I had my pen and my notebooks in my hands.

Doing fieldwork in these conditions of dense secrecy was not easy, and I soon realised that the best way to carry out fieldwork was by simply 'being there' and by doing interviews in very private environments, which was not always possible. In fact, at that time my best informants were a couple of elderly men from Bukor who were living in Kamsar (with Aboubacar); the mere fact of being away from the pressure of the village made them be much more open and relaxed, even on very delicate issues. Later I discovered that the same applied to Conakry. People from Mare, Katako or Bukor who, in their villages, were reluctant to talk to me, were much more open if interviewed in Conakry, far away from the *Bagatai*.

A couple of months after I had met Aboubacar things were improving greatly, and I was gradually filling my until then largely empty notebooks with data and overcoming my inhibition to write things down in front of the somewhat threatening elderly people. Besides, Mare was then preparing the annual football tournament that the Baga have celebrated since 1990 (a tournament that was, again, an important unpredicted element in my research). I found that following the preparation of the tournament (see Chapter Six) was a safe, if informal (and rather boring), way to gather data about social life. But things were to change dramatically in two new and different directions.

On the one hand, in January 1994 Aboubacar and I, having documented Asekou Sayon's action in different villages and having come to the conclusion that, contrary to what many people had told us, Sayon had to be alive, became determined to find

him and check the narratives we had about him with him, in person. Finding him was easier than one might have expected. He was then living in a small coastal village at some 30 kms. south of Boffa city, on the left bank of the Rio Pongo. The first time I met the old man I conducted the interview with Aboubacar, who was thrilled to find the man who had, according to his views, “duped” his elders in 1957. But it was a very awkward interview. Sayon devoted a great deal of time to recalling his encounters with what he called the “sorcerers” of Bukor (Aboubacar’s village) and to tell us how he had destroyed the *amanco ngopon* of Bukor, and Aboubacar felt enormously uneasy. The exact nature of his feelings I do not know, but he told me afterwards that while he would help me get more narratives about Sayon’s deeds, he did not want to meet with the old man again.

On the other hand, in March 1994 I went to Conakry to meet with Thomas Diassi, the only linguist who was helping me with my language progress. To my surprise, I discovered that a German linguist, Erhard Voeltz, had been appointed at the University and had just created a *Centre d’Études des Langues Guinéennes* at the Faculty of Arts with the explicit objective of studying the minority West Atlantic languages of Guinea. When he learned that I was working on Baga Sitem, Voeltz suggested that we should establish a “Baga Sitem workshop” at the *Centre*. He asked me whether I knew of any clever Sitem speaker able to help us get a basic knowledge of Sitem structure and eager to learn how to study his/her own language on his/her own. Needless to say, Aboubacar’s name was the first to come to my mind.

Although Conakry was the last place I wanted to live in, and although I had some qualms about giving up a few months of rural fieldwork, I accepted the offer. Voeltz struck me as a very professional linguist and I was eager to advance in my Baga Sitem learning. But up until then I had no tools whatsoever other than sheer intuition and Aboubacar’s well intended but insufficient explanations, which clearly were not good enough tools. Besides, I also thought that a break from my reluctant Baga would do me some good, and that while based in Conakry I would be able to continue my interviews with Asekou Sayon, whose village was only some 60 kms.

distant from Conakry. So, to cut a long story short, I went back to the *Bagatai* (just in time to attend the opening of the football tournament), and a few weeks later Aboubacar and I settled in Conakry. As I had anticipated, Voeltz agreed with me that Aboubacar had very good linguistic skills. We stayed in Conakry for almost three months, during which we worked with Voeltz four hours a day. In a few weeks we were able to transcribe long texts, some of them from my tapes, others collected from Baga Sitem speakers in Conakry. In that period we also made several trips to the city of Kindia, at some 130 kms. from Conakry, to interview the Catholic father Dominique Camara (a native of Mare), who is a very articulate exponent of his own Baga culture, and an interesting systematiser of Baga “traditional religion.”

But at the same time I was also interviewing Asekou Sayon. Given Aboubacar’s refusal to meet him again, I conducted the interviews with Michel K., a young unemployed sociologist in whose house in Conakry I was staying. In comparison with the first awkward interview with Aboubacar, the sessions with Michel K. (who was not a Baga) went rather smoothly. But I must admit I was gradually getting myself into a very delicate situation. Asekou Sayon was not as interested in talking to me about his life as a holy warrior as he was in fact interested in starting it all over again. From the very beginning he told me that my presence was a sign from Allah to him that he had to start his holy war again. I managed to accomplish a few interviews with him before the situation became literally unbearable.

In fact, things were already more sticky than what I wanted them to be. Without consulting me, Michel K. had decided that Asekou Sayon, whose “occult powers” he literally venerated, would be an excellent *marabout* for his elder brother, a leading politician in Guinea. He used our interviews in order to channel information between his brother and Asekou Sayon. One day we were at home, in Conakry, and Sayon suddenly entered the house. I was shocked to see Sayon in Conakry, and it was then that I understood his visit had nothing to do with me, but rather with Michel K.’s brother, who needed to consult him. Only a few minutes after Sayon had left the house, one of Mare’s *ressortissants* in Conakry (a Catholic man) came to pay us a

visit. Had he arrived five minutes earlier, he would have found me in conversation with the very Muslim leader who forty years ago started a *jihad* against his people and who, according to him, was dead. A few days later, another event was to become even more compromising, when Aboubacar's father, who lived in Conakry, found a picture of me with Sayon, taken by Aboubacar in our meeting in January. Mr Camara, who obviously thought that Sayon was dead, started to ask me why I was getting involved in a situation that should be none of my concern, and decided to confiscate the picture. When I recounted the scene to Michel K., he just said, "well that's it, you've just blown your research. This picture is going to travel to the *Bagatai* long before you arrive there."

I was not too worried, but the truth was that I had to face a practical dilemma. Was I doing the ethnography of the Baga, or the biography of the Muslim leader Asekou Sayon? I have to admit that for a while I thought about the possibility of giving up my Baga ethnography and concentrating my efforts on Asekou Sayon's biography, for at least talking to Sayon meant filling my notebooks and having the feeling of achieving something, as well as having a bunch of intellectuals and professors in Conakry quite interested in my research. But that road was problematic. It was impossible to keep doing Sayon's life story without promising him that I would help him start his *jihad* again (a promise that, I suspect, Michel K. made to Sayon without me realising it). Very significantly, Sayon used to compare me with some mysterious white men who in the late 1950s were following him and buying the objects that he was confiscating from the "pagan" peoples of Guinea. Judging that in post-Sékou Touré's Guinea "paganism" was coming back and realizing that white people were coming back into the country again, he probably thought the time had arrived to return to the way of life of the 1950s: he confiscating "fetishes" in the name of Allah and white people buying them in the name of African art. I could not accept the terms.

It was time for choices to be made. When I finished my three and a half months of linguistic training at Voeltz's *Centre d'Études des Langues Guinéennes*, I had a

second short break in London. On my return to Guinea, I smoothly managed to move away from Sayon (whom, however, I occasionally visited till the end of my stay in Guinea) and I went back to the *Bagatai* (at the end of June 1994).

My second period of fieldwork was to be much more productive than the first. Arafan and other people in Mare were rather amazed by my improvement in Baga Sitem, and by the fact that I could transcribe long texts and then read them aloud to them. One day I told Arafan that while in Conakry I had been interviewing Asekou Sayon, and to my surprise he told me he knew it already. We then had a very good discussion, and I realised that having met Asekou Sayon gave me some privileged access to a very delicate set of issues (discussed in Chapter Five). I also realised that people appreciated my decision to go back to the Baga, and that I was getting much better information, especially from people I had already interviewed before. Many of them would acknowledge having lied to me in our first interviews and having decided to tell me the truth now that they knew me better. To start with lies, by the way, seemed to be a common tactic in the endless path towards knowledge. Even Aboubacar found it necessary to give wrong linguistic data to Voeltz at the beginning of our Baga Sitem workshop, wrong data that later he would correct, to the continual puzzlement of both Voeltz and myself. When I asked him why he had done so, Aboubacar replied that that was the way to teach things: by starting with lies.¹¹ Baga have a complex theory of lying, and they often say that reality (*dwuru*) is made out of *kance* and *yem*: truth and lie. It is unfortunate that while secrecy has become an aspect of West African knowledge that has attracted the attention of many researchers and is the object of a huge body of scholarship, the importance of lying has been by and large neglected, although I think things are starting to change (see Hoffman 1998 for a seminal article).

¹¹Interestingly enough, a couple of years later, when I was based in Paris, I heard a similar phrase in a TV interview with the late African scholar Amadou Hampâté Ba. He was telling the audience how the Dogon had been lying to the famous French ethnographer Marcel Griaule during seventeen years before they decided to tell him a few true things, or to let him discern the truth out of the lies, and he insisted that starting with lies was a common feature of West African systems of knowledge.

Little by little Aboubacar and I started to redo much of the fieldwork we had done before my first meeting with Asekou Sayon, and to start opening new lines of enquiry too. My linguistic training with Voeltz delivered the goods, and I could do my informal fieldwork (i.e. living in Mare) using the Baga Sitem language, although I always relied on Aboubacar to do long interviews that we taped and then transcribed and translated. At the same time, the fact that I had been with Sayon and doing archival research in Conakry and that I had some new visions of the events of 1957 made people look at me with some respect. I was not only interviewing them; sometimes I was telling them how things happened. Also, I became much more assertive and determined to get information out of people. I recall, for instance, that François Bangoura, from Mare, who so far had not been at all interested in me, agreed to be interviewed and in fact became a key informant for the eight months of fieldwork that followed. On our first or second meeting, when I touched the delicate issue of slavery, he told me, assertively, that Baga had never had any slaves. Instead of just listening, as I would have done at an earlier stage, I disagreed with him and told him a few things I already knew about Baga slavery. Probably surprised about my knowledge, he laughed and said “well, now we can talk.” And so we did in a series of very productive sessions.

Apart from building a solid network of informants in the region of Mare and its surroundings, I was also frequently visiting Aboubacar’s village (Bukor), which indeed was different to Mare; the comparison between the two villages became very productive, as I hope will be clear in different parts of the thesis. As coincidence would have it, in the previous year (1993/94), the preparation for the Baga football tournament and “carnival” had taken place in Mare, the village I was living in, and in 1994/95 they were to take place in Bukor, the village I was becoming interested in.

I think it would be fair to say that most of the data presented in this thesis were collected in the second period, after my linguistic training at the *Centre d’Études des Langues Guinéennes*, after my meetings with Sayon, after my interviews with father Dominique, and after I had got over the depressing mood of the first year. But this is

not to say that the first period was useless. In fact, it was thanks to that period that people started to open their doors to me. My situation in that respect was similar to that of John Beattie described in his methodological account *Understanding an African Kingdom: Bunyoro* (1965) where he reveals how anxious he was getting about having his folders always empty during the first nine months of his fieldwork, and how fast he started to fill them up with data in the second visit. But writing down data is not all that ethnographic fieldwork is about, and I sometimes wonder if, despite the emptiness of my notebooks and despite my awkward feelings, I really did not learn much more about the Baga during the first months of palm wine drinking, rice farming observation and pelican hunting with Kande than I did with Aboubacar's highly intellectual elaborations or with the structured interviews I conducted with my informants during my second half of fieldwork.

I stayed in Guinea until April 1995, just after Bukor's inaugural "carnival." In April 1996, one year after I had come back to Europe, while based in Paris, I went back to Guinea in order to attend the annual football tournament, this time to take place in the Baga Sitem village of Kawass (see Chapter Six). I was in Guinea only for five weeks, but I think I never conducted as intense a fieldwork as during those five weeks. On my arrival to Mare, people informed me that Arafan's second wife, Hanna, was in hospital in Boké, and that Arafan was in Kamsar trying to sell his bike in order to pay for his wife's hospitalisation. I went to Boké to visit Hanna and then did what I judged the only right and natural thing to do, which was of course to pay for Hanna's urgent treatment. Just by coincidence, the Mare *ressortissant* Antoine Camara (who was from the same lineage as Hanna) was in Mare at the time. He was, the reader may recall, the man who more than two years before had told me he felt sorry for me, that the Baga were very secretive and all that. This time he did not say anything to me, but he asked me to come and visit him in Conakry whenever I would return. When I went to see him in Conakry, Antoine told me he had been very moved by my action towards his classificatory sister. He then told me, for the second time in my fieldwork (the first was El-Hadj Halassan), that I thought I was studying the Baga when the Baga were in reality studying me, and that if in the beginning he did not

like me, he had thought I was a decent person and decided to help me. Not only did I then have very good sessions with him, in which he was extremely open about as many topics as I wanted to discuss, but he also organised a few more meetings in his house with other Mare and Katako *ressortissants*, all of them very open and helpful, a network I wished had been available before.

I paid a last visit to Guinea a year after that, in April 1997, when I repeated a few interviews with the *ressortissants* and went to the Fouta Djallon with Aboubacar to carry out fieldwork on the (supposed) descendants of the pre-Fulbe Baga inhabitants of the Fouta Djallon (see Chapter Seven). I also attended the inauguration of the Baga football tournament in Kiffinda (a Baga Fore village), but that was indeed a quick visit I paid at the invitation of Voeltz and the German Ambassador in Guinea. Not knowing anything about the preparation of the tournament, and not having had the chance to discuss it with anybody, I have not included any of it in my thesis.

1.4. Description of the thesis

By and large, the thesis is organised historically, although some chapters are more historical than others. Chronologically speaking, the thesis contains three separate bodies of data. The first one is made up of pre- and early colonial data, either extracted from written sources or based on oral accounts gathered in the field. The second contains data on the late colonial period and particularly on the iconoclast revolution led by Asekou Sayon, including on the one hand his own accounts, and on the other the accounts of my informants (together with a scholarly contextualisation based on library research). The third is, to put it this way, data on the “ethnographic present.” This tripartition of Baga history is adopted not only because I found it appropriate in order to present my material, but also because it seems to me to be a widespread model which both scholars and local individuals use to think Baga history.

In the thesis, however, this chronological tripartition of data is not respected in a strict historical narrative. In fact, many ethnographic elements are revealed at quite an early stage (in Chapter Two and, notably, in Chapter Three) so as to provide the reader with some elementary background that will make reading about today's historical and cultural processes (Chapter Six) easier to follow. Here is a more detailed breakdown of the chapters:

Chapter Two ("The mangrove people") situates the Baga in the coastal region where they live today and deals with their pre-colonial and early colonial history, and at the same time with the natural environment of the Guinean coast where the Baga live today. It is argued that the history and even the ethnogenesis of the Baga is best understood as that of a group formed on the periphery of the Fulbe Fouta Djallon highlands, a group made out of migrants from the Fouta itself, from Bundu (once a pre-colonial Fulbe state in today's Senegal) and probably from elsewhere. In pre-colonial and early colonial sources, the Baga territory is often described as an "asylum", as a region that used to attract different layers of outcasts from the hinterland who would be incorporated into the "Baga" category. If my analysis is correct, this would be similar to other coastal "hollow category" regions, such as those analysed by Edwin Ardener on the Cameroonian coast (Ardener 1972). This incorporative logic, which has strong parallels in other parts of the Upper Guinea coast, most notably in Guinea Bissau (Crowley 1990, Crowley 1997) is still active today. The so-called *Bagatai* attracts people from all over Guinea and Guinea Bissau for medical reasons (each village being specialised in a particular disease), many of whom decide to stay in the region and never go back to their own.

As would be expected, the view of the coast as an "internal African frontier" in Kopytoff's terms (Kopytoff 1987) and of its inhabitants as "frontiersmen" is often contested by the Baga themselves, who present a much more unified version of their history and of their origins. In fact, it is almost paradoxical that while Baga are literally fascinated with their origins, the concept of ethnogenesis is normally abhorred and avoided, or projected to such a distant past that it becomes a myth not

subject to historical analysis. The Baga normally say that they were Baga long before they were on the coast. Indeed long before they were on the Fouta Djallon highlands prior to the arrival of the Fulbe, or even before that, when they were in such distant places as the Niger delta or still more distant ones such as Ethiopia or Egypt. They do not deny that they *have* a history. In fact, their identity is always historically presented and discussed. But they will strongly deny that they *are* the result of a history. When reflecting on this point I realized that much debate on the interrelation between history and ethnicity in Africa is vitiated by a lack of some basic definitions of history. Thus, when J.-P. Chrétien and G. Prunier wrote, in the title of a book, that “ethnic groups have a history” (meaning that there are no “peoples without history”) they did not seem to realize (at least not in the introduction to their volume written by Chrétien) that “to have a history” may mean two different things: to be the agent of a longer or shorter history (in this sense the Baga would proudly agree with them, since they are sure that they have a particularly long one), and to be the more or less unfinished outcome of a series of events and the sedimentation of different processes in which different agencies are involved. In this sense, they would probably not agree¹². Yet, it is my contention that Baga identity is the precipitate of a series of processes that took place on the coast (hence the title of the chapter). In this chapter we will also see how, over the centuries, the people called the Baga inhabiting the mangroves have managed to build an impressive, somewhat fearsome stereotype about themselves, and that this stereotype was a crucial element of the protection granted to the Baga by the coastal mangrove, at least as crucial as the actual mangrove was. In this sense, the Baga, like other groups on the periphery of the Fouta Djallon, could be described as being a “deep rural” society, using a concept coined by Murray Last (Last 1980) and recently applied to the Upper Guinea region by Richard Fanthorpe in his study of the Limba (Fanthorpe 1998).

¹²Only after having finished this Introduction have I read an article by Richard Fardon (Fardon 1996) in which he, too, points out the obviousness of Chrétien and Prunier’s phrase (and who would today disagree anyway that ethnic groups have a history?) and uses the occasion to make a Foucaultian distinction between the “genealogical” and the “archaeological” dimensions of a people’s identity, which, if I understand him properly, is quite similar to my own distinction. Given the belatedness of my reading of Fardon’s article, I have not brought his insightful distinction into my discussion.

Chapter Three (“Social institutions”) will present the basic components of a Baga identity as we know it today, with particular attention to the Baga Sitem among whom I was living. The idea is not to provide a full ethnographic account of the Baga; it is rather to provide specific background knowledge to help us understand the data presented and discussed in later chapters. I will therefore try to make explicit in this one a series of ideal typical forms that constitute a societal matrix in which meaning is always heavily contested. Issues of hierarchy, seniority and “purity” will therefore be given special attention.

Chapter Four (“The colonial legacy: Baga chiefs and Baga customs”) adopts a more straightforward historical mode of presentation of data on the colonial experience of the Baga, especially of the Baga Sitem of Boké Prefecture (*Cercle de Boké* in colonial times). This chapter is based on data obtained in the prefectural archives of both Boké and Boffa, very rich sources that so far had remained unexplored. In order to understand the religious and political transformations that the Baga were to experience in 1957, often described to me as the moment in which the Baga “got rid of their heavy customs,” I think it is crucial to understand all the pressures, internal and external, that the Baga suffered under colonial rule. It is also necessary to understand the impact of the creation of chieftaincies, with the imposition of chiefs in a region where there were no easily recognisable pre-colonial chiefdoms. Despite being a historical rupture, the colonial period also presented some continuities with the pre-colonial Baga. The fact that the first chief of the *Canton Baga* was a Fulbe man and that the Baga attempted to murder him in the village of Tolkoc by making an oath to *amanco ngopon* has a clear pre-colonial resonance: the story reminds us of other pre-colonial stories in which the mangrove and the “paganism” of the Baga allied to protect the Baga against the Fulbe.

In strict continuation with Chapter Four, Chapter Five (“Youths vs. elders: The politics of an iconoclast movement”) deals with the iconoclast revolution of Asekou Sayon and his followers. This chapter incorporates part of the material gathered from

Sayon himself. I have entitled it “youths vs. elders” because I think the best angle to analyse what happened in 1957 is to look at it as a generational conflict. This approach is not only congruent with what Baga people say but at the same time allows for a comparison between the situation in 1957 and the situation they are living in today. Indeed, the Baga experience today a strong generational problem, and it is possible to find both differences and similarities between the situation today and the situation in 1957. The similarities can reveal some structural features of Baga social life and of the articulation of power and age, while the differences will reveal the importance of political contexts (decolonization in the 1950s, democratization in the 1990s) in shaping discourses about Baga “culture” and in creating internal confrontations. While the youths in the 1950s were trying to escape from the burden of their own culture (to put it in their words), the youths in the 1990s are willing to return to the customs their elders despised in 1957, giving rise to a very interesting set of debates and negotiations that we will see in the next chapter. In order to contextualize the movement in a broader framework (the creation of the independent Republic of Guinea) and to avoid seeing it as merely an internal generational conflict, I will discuss the relationship between Islam and French decolonization, and will bring into my discussion some authors who have written on, as well as those who have pointed out the importance of religious movements in the making of public spaces, most notably the French authors J.-P. Dozon (Dozon 1995) and J.-F. Bayart (Bayart 1993a and 1993b).

Chapter Six (“Revitalizing Baga culture, rewriting Baga history”) deals more directly with the situation today and with discourses about Baganess in the contemporary Republic of Guinea. This chapter links the “ethnographic present” to the events described in the previous chapter (which, incidentally, was also an ethnographically based chapter, not just a historical one: most of Asekou Sayon’s followers and opponents were still alive when I conducted my fieldwork and to them the 1956/57 events were not as distant as they may seem to us). Although the title of this chapter refers to a “cultural revitalization,” my intention is not to prove that revitalisation does or does not take place but rather to use the concept in order to elucidate what we

refer to when we are talking about Baga culture. Revitalisation is a difficult enough phenomenon to assess, one of those whose existence very much depends on our definitions and on our criteria to establish the relevance of data. With the same strength with which someone could say that the Baga are revitalising their culture, someone else could say that such a culture is dead and gone, and that Kamsar and “modernity” are going to finish with whatever is left anyway. Things and debates are happening among the Baga that are particularly interesting from the angle of the politics of culture. The Baga Sitem, together with their neighbours the Baga Fore and the Baga Pukur are strongly involved in activities aiming at expressing their culture both in Guinea and abroad. This contemporary definition of Baganess involves both a precise delimitation of the *Bagatai* or Baga territory (in clear contrast with the fuzzy notion of Baga used in Conakry that I alluded to in the first part of this Introduction), partially achieved through cultural performances such as the Baga football tournament analysed in the chapter, and the elaboration of a proper Baga history, written by educated intellectuals. The interesting thing, however, is not this literate production in itself, but its articulation with the by and large illiterate rural community. How does the need to have a history interact with notions of secrecy? How does the relationship between the lack of customary initiation and the rise of literate education affect notions of identity? What is the role of educated *ressortissants* in the development of the area?

Chapter Seven (“*Rice and salt: Being Baga through time*”) offers conclusions to the thesis by pulling out a few more or less constant themes in the thesis. The title is based on the phrase “*sna abaka malo-mer*” (“we the Baga rice - salt”), which was written on a long stick carried by a woman during the “carnival” that accompanied the football tournament in Mare in April 1994 (Figure 10). At a time when most educated men were giving me highly intellectualised discourses about the deeds and the culture of the Baga I welcomed the reminder by that woman of this rather humble, succinct, practical and somewhat more poetic definition of Baga: “rice and salt” (which is, besides, a gender-balanced definition, since salt making is a women’s occupation). Indeed, salt extraction and mangrove rice farming are the two activities

that the Baga have been practising in the mangroves ever since they arrived there, whenever that was, and that have made them be the Baga (as opposed to other people on the coast, who do not do these two activities). In some way the phrase connected the past with what the Baga were saying about themselves already in the early 19th century: that they were an independent people, and that all they wanted was to be let alone so that they could continue their two main mangrove activities: to farm mangrove rice and to extract sea salt. It expressed the “deep ruralness” of the Baga and it made me think that whatever the intellectual *ressortissants* wanted to say about the Baga, they would have to come to terms with their rural reality. In this chapter I will explore the duality of Baga “culture” (things they *do* and things they *say*); the interaction between on the one hand secrecy and elusiveness and on the other hand public discourses and international projections; the differences between the reification of culture and cultural transmission. My general point about history and identity will be similar to the one made by John Peel in his seminal article on Yoruba ethnogenesis (Peel 1989), namely that in order for history to be “invented” the invention must be based on real historical experiences, and by Bruce Berman in his recent article on ethnicity and the state, where we can read that “ethnic identity cannot be conjured out of thin air, it must be built on real cultural experiences” (Berman 1998:312). I am aware of the risk of reintroducing primordialist ideas through the backdoor, of falling into a somewhat vicious circle in which the identity of the group is explained by the non-explained existence of the group: the Yoruba inventing their Yorubanness, the Kikuyu discussing the civic virtues of Kikuyuness and thus defining their “ethnic” identity (Lonsdale 1996b), the Baga defining their Baganess, etc. But I think that such vicious circles are not to be avoided by researchers (as “presentists” and “inventionists” simply do), but rather that they are to be documented and analysed: social, cultural and ethnic identities are often (and certainly in the Baga case) formulated and reinforced through a feedback between experience and discourse and, as I will show, between oral “tradition” and literate elaborations.

As previously stated in my fieldwork section, having not been initiated into *amanco ngopon*'s mysteries, I do not know what the meaning of "Baga" may be. Etymologically, it is possible that "*ba ka*" means (in Susu) the "people of the sea." The Baga priest Dominique Camara once told me that Baga means "the person," and certainly I have heard it used as a synonym for "*fum*" ("person") (see Chapter Three). Other people told me there is an esoteric meaning of "Baga" and many Baga Sitem told me that the Baga who live in Conakry are *Baga Foté* ("white, European Baga") because the "real" Baga are black and live away from big trading centres.¹³ The Baga seem to be obsessed with definitions about themselves, and I believe that definitions are historically grounded. Today, Baga no longer have initiations (which was probably a powerful instrument to control who was and who was not a Baga), and whatever the meanings of "Baga" will be in the future, they will have to be historically linked to the events I am describing in this thesis. Let this be the justification of my work; maybe one day someone may find it useful in order to investigate the different meanings of "Baga."

¹³The Susu term *Baga Foté* (White Baga) is structurally opposed to *Baga Fore*, which means "Black Baga." This concept, which in the past was used to refer to all the Baga, is today applied only to a subgroup of the Baga, also known as the *Bulongic*. The Baga Fore or *Bulongic* live deeper into the mangrove than the other groups. Baga history could be described as the process by which *Baga Fore* peoples are gradually converted into *Baga Foté* as they become involved in white people's activities, abandoning their mangroves and their blackness.

Chapter 2

The mangrove people

2.1. Introduction

Although it may sound completely harmless, the title of this chapter is in fact intended to be rather provocative, as indeed are its contents. The importance of the mangrove in discourses about the history and the culture of the Baga is often minimised. In many general books on Guinea or on West Africa, the Baga are described as the ancient inhabitants of the Fouta, who were pushed out by the Fulbe; the fact that the environment where they live are the mangroves is left as a minor factor. Marie-Paule Ferry went as far as to write that “maybe we should talk of a ‘coastal group’ [to refer to the languages spoken by the Baga, the Landuma and the Temne], but the word ‘Baga’ evokes well their migratory history and their origin” (Ferry, nd.:7; my translation and parenthesis). When writing their own history, Baga scholars also tend to stress their “continentality” rather than their coastality. Certainly, Baga people (as any people living anywhere else) must have come from somewhere. But the history of a people is one thing and the history of their ethnic identity and of the category by which they are known is another. In this chapter I show that the Guinean mangrove zone that a people called the Baga have inhabited since at least the end of the 15th century has been crucial in providing them with a distinct cultural identity. I also show that the fact of having been on the periphery of a Fulbe pre-colonial state is as important as is the ecology. Although based more on sources than on fieldwork (especially in the first part), the inspiration of the chapter comes directly from my own stay and experiences among the mangrove Baga, which made me be especially perceptive to what sources had to say about them and about their environment. In writing this chapter, I have taken up Paul Hair’s methodological invitation:

[O]ur emphasis on elements of continuity in the history of the Guinea coast at least suggests that the overworked question ‘Where did the people here come from?’ might be profitably given a rest in favour of the question ‘When and how did the people living in this place come to be the people they are today?’ (Hair 1967:268).

When writing this, Paul Hair had in mind the African historians who postulate massive migrations of peoples without much evidence or theoretical discussions. His invitation to look at what today we would call “ethnogenesis” (a word he did not use, but which is implicit in this very quotation) was meant to counterbalance what he (drawing on a conversation with linguist David Dalby) called the “Clapham Junction Theory of African History” (Hair 1967:266). It has to be said that, as far as Baga are concerned, Paul Hair has taken up his own invitation in a recent short piece he has written on this people (Hair 1997), meant to give a different version of Baga history to the one offered by Lamp (who, by and large, seems to endorse notions of Baga collective migrations). However, my argument is different to Hair’s. Hair is interested in warning researchers about how little we can say about Baga migrations based on pre-colonial written sources. I will be more directly addressing the importance of the mangrove ecology, with the Fouta on its periphery, in shaping a distinct cultural identity to the inhabitants.

2.2. The Baga groups

As has been said in Chapter One, the first difficulty for researchers dealing with the Baga is to delimit the object of study. The geographic, ethnic and linguistic boundaries of the Baga are not at all easy to determine. Broadly speaking, there are eight Baga groups located in different places on the coast of Guinea, between Conakry in the south and the Rio Nuñez in the north (See Map 3). Each one of these groups is rather small. The Sitem, probably the biggest one, is composed of just 15 villages of some 1,500 Sitem speakers per village. The Baga groups are (see Appendix 5 for more information on each of them):

<i>Group</i>	<i>Location</i>
1. Baga Kalum	Conakry peninsula.
2. Baga Koba	Between Conakry and the Rio Pongo.
3. Baga Marara	Marara island (on the left bank of the Rio Pongo).
4. Baga Kakissa	Between the Rio Pongo and Cape Verga.
5. Baga Fore (<i>Bulongic</i>)	On the northern sea shore of Cape Verga.
6. Baga Pokur	Entrance of the Rio Kapatchez.
7. Baga Sitem	Shores of Kapatchez, left bank of the Rio Nuñez.
8. Baga Mandori	Right bank of the Rio Nuñez.

Each of these groups has its own language, with overlapping similarities. Baga Kalum and Baga Koba appear to be the same language¹, and Baga Kakissa and Baga Marara are also very similar. Baga Sitem (which has five dialects) and Baga Mandori could be considered as the same language². These three languages (Kalum/Koba, Marara/Kakissa, Sitem/Mandori) are closely linked to each other. The Baga Fore and the Baga Pokur, however, speak two languages which, while they are related to each other, have nothing whatsoever in common with any of the other Baga languages. In fact, they could be distantly related to the six Nalu languages (or dialects?) spoken on both sides of the border between Guinea and Guinea Bissau (Houis 1950:43-46, Voeltz, p.c. 1997). For more information about all these languages, see Voeltz (Voeltz, ed., 1996a).

As I have said in my Introduction, the coast is also populated by other ethnic groups (see Map 3). Both linguistically and culturally, some of these groups present striking similarities to the Baga, particularly so the Landuma living in the hinterland of the Prefecture of Boké, whose language is virtually identical to that of the Baga Sitem, and the Nalu, living on the coastal mangroves between the Rio Nuñez and Guinea Bissau. In fact, it is not unusual to hear Baga people referring to the Landuma as “Baga Landuma,” a designation also found in some written sources (Macclaud 1906:77). According to Théodore Camara, not only the Landuma but also the Nalu belonged in the past to what he called the “Baga groups”:

Among the Baga groups, the Landuma are the most vulnerable; both Islam as well as Christianity have since long ago penetrated them and finally made them turn away from Baga concepts and traditions, at least from those considered “animist.” They abandoned them many years before Guinean independence.

¹ Baga Kalum, the dialect once spoken by the Baga living in what today is Conakry, is not spoken anymore. But we know it rather well, as the dialect was recorded by Sigmund Koelle in his comparative lexicon *Polyglotta Africana* compiled in Freetown and published in 1854. Thanks to this lexicon, we can state that the language was virtually identical to Baga Koba, which is still spoken and on which Voeltz conducted research in 1996.

² The Baga Mandori, on the right side of the Rio Nuñez, have been rather neglected by researchers. However, in 1996 Erhard Voeltz and Aboubacar Camara carried out a linguistic survey and reached the conclusion that Mandori should be considered as one more dialect of Sitem (in which case, Baga Sitem would have six dialects).

This is equally the case of their neighbours the Nalu (Camara 1966:28; my translation).

It is particularly interesting for the purposes of this chapter that the “traditions” which, according to Théodore Camara, made people belong to the Baga groups were those considered as “animist.” Despite the fact that today there are no “animist” Baga individuals in a full sense (although there is a great deal of syncretism between Christianity or Islam and pre-Christian or pre-Muslim practices and beliefs), religious concepts like “animism,” “paganism” or, more than any other, “fetishism” are often mentioned when discussing Baga history and culture. As I intend to show, the historical significance of this Baga “animism” lies in its explicit opposition to Islam. The Baga, living on the periphery of the Fulbe Fouta Djallon, have defined their identity against the pressures of this Muslim and slave raiding people. This opposition to the Fulbe presents many characteristics of what Nicholas Thomas called the “inversion of tradition” (Thomas 1992), i.e. the phenomenon by which a people defines their cultural identity by explicitly inverting symbols or narratives that belong to a neighbouring people. I will discuss a few clear instances of these inversions among the Baga.

From a linguistic point of view, some of the Baga groups (particularly the Baga Kakissa and the Baga Kalum) are disappearing, if not already gone. The reasons and mechanisms of this disappearance have not been fully explained by historians and anthropologists. In 1954, Denise Paulme was told by some Baga Kakissa youths that “our fathers were Baga, but we are Susu” (Paulme 1957:277), and ever since the cultural and linguistic “assimilation” into Susu has been somewhat taken for granted without any further research being carried out. No doubt Susu-ization is an ever-increasing process on the coast of Guinea. However, colonial documents I have examined regarding the Baga Kakissa disappearance testify to a real out-migration of Baga peoples from the then Canton Sobané into other areas, either north or southwards, and the replacement of their empty villages by Susu-speaking newcomers in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s³ (I will return to the colonial history of the Canton

³ Cf. among other documents, the two-page “*List of migrants of the village of Sobané since July 3, 1933*,” compiled by the *commandant de cercle* of Boffa (François Tonnens) on July

Sobané in Chapter Four). These migrations of Baga groups along the coast (as opposed to the migrations from the hinterland to the coast, which appear to be the main objective of researchers) should be considered more carefully in order to explain the distribution of the current Baga populations.

The only groups where the linguistic, geographical and cultural boundaries overlap to create a territorial unity are the Baga Fore, the Baga Pokur and the Baga Sitem. These three groups are today grouped in one single territory called (in Baga) *Dabaka* or, (in French) *Bagatai*, a word stemming from the plural Susu *Baga tae* (Baga villages)⁴. Each of the three groups has its own language, the three of them being mutually unintelligible, although it seems that Baga Fore and Baga Pokur are closer to each other than they are to Baga Sitem (Voeltz 1996a:8). Susu is the *lingua franca* of the three groups (and of all other coastal people as well), although my experience is that the Baga Sitem language is widely understood by most speakers of the other two languages. More socio-linguistic research must be carried out in order to determine the reasons why Sitem is understood by many Baga Pokur and Baga Fore individuals while Sitem speakers do not normally understand a word of either of the two other languages.

Some informants explained the fragmentation of Baga groups along the Guinean coast by claiming that long ago the whole coast was “Baga.” Yet this proves difficult to support with the historical evidence at hand. Furthermore, even if it were true, it is still difficult to determine what “Baga” may have meant in the past. Maybe it was nothing else but a “hollow category,” to use a term coined by Edwin Ardener (Ardener 1972), and that whoever was on the coast doing some specific activities (like, say, farming

17, 1948. *Archives Préfectorales de Boffa*. Box “Canton Sobané.” The document lists 48 “families” (some of them rather huge) that left the *canton* during these fifteen years.

⁴ This etymology was given by Lerouge (Lerouge 1927:138n), who always wrote *Baga taë*. It could as well be the case that *Bagatai* comes in fact from the singular *Baga ta* (“Baga village”) with an euphonic “i” at the end, which is a common Susu ending tendency. The concept is always used in the singular. Although in general I prefer to use Baga words rather than their Susu equivalent (*amanco ngopon* instead of *kakilambe*, *Bukor* instead of *Bigori*, etc.), I use the Susu *Bagatai* instead of *Dabaka* because it has become a very common word in Guinea, not only among the Baga or the Susu.

flooded rice and extracting salt) would be considered as “Baga” by strangers. Even today, the categorisation of Baga and Susu is in many places confused and individuals can jump from one to the other (see Introduction). This is especially true among the Baga people living in regions with high Susu density, such as Koba and Kalum (Conakry). In the north, especially among the Sitem, the Baga identity is much stronger and exclusive⁵.

Whatever the case may be, the linguistic continuum goes on into Sierra Leone, where one finds the Temne, who speak a language closely related to Baga Sitem and to Landuma. I put forth the hypothesis that the linguistic cluster Landuma, Baga Sitem, Baga Kakissa, Baga Koba, Baga Kalum, Temne (a cluster with huge discontinuities) is in fact the heir of the old *lingua franca* Sape, spoken in the area before the arrival of the Mande-speaking groups in the 16th and early 17th century. (Similar hypotheses have been put forth by Hair 1969:56 and Brooks 1993:82.) This is not too bold a hypothesis, since the examples we know of Sape words (found in 17th century sources, such as Alvares (Alvares [1615] 1990) or de Faro ([1663-64] 1982), to mention only two of them, bear a strong similarity with current Baga and Temne words. The conventional historical view about the Sape is that the arrival of the Mane (Mande speaking peoples) broke up their broad unity and pushed them into the mangroves. André Arcin, for instance, claimed that the arrival of the “primitive Mande,” as he referred to the Mane, pushed the Sape towards the coast, where they had to find refuge among the Portuguese settlers (Arcin 1911:11-12). There is a huge literature on this expansion of Mande speaking groups at the expense of the Sape between the 15th and the 17th century (Thomas 1919-21; Rodney 1967 and 1970:39-71; Person 1971; Massing 1985; Wondji 1985:90-96; Brooks 1993:286-319). However, I do not know whether a clear picture of the kind of political unity the Sape were (kingdom?, confederation of tribes?) will ever emerge.

⁵ This chapter, as the whole thesis on the whole, deals primarily with the cultural identity of the peoples living in the so-called *Bagatai* today (Baga Pokur, Baga Fore, Baga Sitem) which appear to have been much more “encapsulated” in the mangroves than the rest of the Bagas in the south (Baga Kalum, Baga Koba).

Whatever the case may be, while it is possible that some West Atlantic-speaking coastal groups (namely some of the Baga, the Landuma, and the Temne), today separated by clusters of Susu speakers, are the linguistic heirs of a much bigger linguistic community (the Sape), the fact remains that not all the coastal West-Atlantic languages may trace such ancestry. The languages spoken by the Baga Fore, the Baga Pokur or the Nalu are certainly unrelated to Sape (in fact, they might be connected to some pre-Sape language). Despite recent major elucidations, the linguistic history of the Guinean coast is still a big puzzle.

2.3. The Baga, a coastal people

Whatever the linguistic history of the Guinean coast may have been, the incontestable fact is that the Baga are, today, the inhabitants of the Guinean mangroves. All the Baga groups share some characteristics that make it possible (for us as well as for themselves) to conceive of them as a single group: similar rituals and belief systems, same rice farming techniques, salt extracting techniques, marriage alliances even among different subgroups (especially among the Sitem, Pokur, and Baga Fore), etc. Among these common characteristics one deserves special attention: the claim that the origins of the Baga are in the Fouta Djallon. In effect, there seems to be something of a consensus, although by no means shared by all the informants, about the origins of the Baga in the Fouta Djallon highlands.

However strong these claims of “origins” are, specific evidence about Baga migrations or about their presence in the Fouta is virtually non-existent. It may well be the case that some individuals who make up the Baga ethnic group have ancestors among the pre-Muslim population of the Fouta Djallon. But Baga is fundamentally a coastal culture, and notions of a massive transfer of Baga society and culture from the Fouta (or from elsewhere, for that matter) to the coast have little or no explanatory value. French explorer Claude Maclaud had already expressed this feeling when he visited Guinea at the turn of the century:

The legends of the Baga assign them as origin the highlands of the Fouta: I have myself not been able to gather any fact that would support that hypothesis. In any case, this migration must have taken place in a very distant past, as the Baga are today wonderfully adapted to the country that they inhabit. If they have ever been a mountain race, many centuries must have passed before they have become the maritime population that they are today (MacIaud 1906:38; my translation).

Much later, physical anthropologist Léon Pales similarly minimised the importance of searching for the origins of the Baga in the hinterland of Guinea:

If this [that the Baga came from the Fouta] were true, these mountain men would have abruptly changed their environment (...) in order to become men of the swamps, of the estuaries, of the littoral. Mountain people thrown into the plain, and what a plain! Land men changed into a sea population (...) One can imagine the physiological upheavals brought about by such a sudden, or almost sudden change of environment, way of life, and nourishment. (...)

Anthropologically speaking, we do not know what the original Baga were like. As to those of today, we can assert that they are a beautiful human group. There is reason to think that the adaptation to the new environment has not been unfavourable to them, at least not to the fifth or sixth generation (Pales 1947:135; my translation and parentheses).

Whatever the origins of Baga people may be, all the characteristics of the Baga society, all that defines it as one society and one culture, appears to be linked in one way or another to the mangroves where the Baga live today. The mangrove nourishes them, the mangrove protects them, the mangrove gives them a common character. This importance of the mangrove, expressed as an explicit opposition to the Fulbe Fouta, can be gauged in a popular narrative recorded by Father Marius Balez, one of the first, if highly biased, ethnographers of the Baga people:

One day, says the legend, a small group of Baga who had, a long time before, left towards the west were possessed by the need to go back eastwards, or rather to see once again their birth land. But were they just responding to this feeling? It seems not.

We find here, once again, the traditional, general idea about the great feats of a tribe. "The second year after they left Egypt," we read in the Bible, "Moses sent twelve men in advance (...) in order to consider the land of Canaan. Forty days later, they came back and showed the fruits of the [Promised] land to all the crowd (...)"

Our maritime Baga, in order to encourage their relatives accomplished a similar demonstration. They went eastwards with some boughs of a mangrove tree. It was meant to tell their relatives: "See the good place, the good soil, the Promised Land." Well! they did not need more than that to start the migration. What does it matter whether this legend is true or false? The fact is that, since for at least several centuries, the Baga have created in the swamps some magnificent farming areas (Balez 1930:8-9; my translation).

Undoubtedly, this story, at least in its form if not in its content, is due more to the Biblical imagination of Father Balez than to the historical memory of his informants. The return to the Fouta Djallon (if such a legend existed) could be seen as a symbolic inversion, not too rare in Africa⁶, that Balez instrumentalized by comparing it to the Hebrew migration from Egypt, the *locus classicus* of all *Völkerwanderungen*. But there is room to presume that Balez based his narrative, if not directly on Baga "pure" oral history, at the very least on a real perception shared by the Baga that opposes the mangroves to the Fouta. We will see more instances of how the missionaries manipulated this opposition to their own ends.

The coastal Baga seem to have constructed their ethnic identity by expressing opposition to external pressures, of which two must be singled out. First, the Fulbe pressure, against which the mangroves have protected them (or so the Baga claim). Second, external pressures from Europeans, slave traders and colonial administrators. Baga reaction to these agents has been more often than not to hide deeper in the mangroves rather than to engage in open rebellion, although this has also taken place. This is particularly true of the northern Baga, those occupying the *Bagatai* today. This group has developed what Murray Last, in his work on the "pagan" Maguzawa of Kano and Katsina in northern Nigeria, called an "isolationist rationale" (Last 1980:6).

A good description of this isolationist and elusive attitude of the coastal Baga is given by the slave trader Theophilus Conneau, who was based in Boffa during much of the first half of the 19th century. He paid a visit to the Baga people in 1827 and described

⁶ A similar inversion of a migratory narrative has been used in a recent film on a Guinea Bissauan people who must return to the interior of the continent and "remake" their history in order to escape a curse. Cf. *Pó di sangue* (Dir. Flora Gomes, Guinea Bissau 1995).

them as those “worthy Africans, which in honesty could be compared with the most civilized nations of the world” (Conneau 1977:99). He went on:

This Bager [*sic.*] nation have a language of their own (...). They live and intermarry in their own solitary tribes, they inhabit the muddy shores of the rivers, and as their occupation is boiling salt in the dry season and making palm oil in the rainy, their abodes are necessarily built in the flat and swampy entrance of the river borders. (...).

After a very tedious pull we arrived at a narrow creek, and with difficulty pushed our canoe through the mangrove branches which intercepted it and finally landed on a mud bank which we had to waddle through knee deep before we reached the more solid shore. (...). The old gentleman (...) said that they, the Baggers, were neither Sosoos nor white men; that a stranger’s property was as safe as their own; that their labor supplied them with food and all the necessities of life, that they had no need to steal from their guests or to sell one another. The Bager man is of a dark color and middling in size, but broad in shoulders. They are neither brave nor war like, and as they live separate from the contact of other tribes they are never at variance.

A Foulah [Fulbe] law protects them from foreign violence (being salt-makers, this is their prerogative). Salt is regarded in the Interior as one of the greatest necessities of life, and its makers are under the safeguard of this law. (...).

I have said that they do not sell one another, but they often buy children of both sexes and adopt them, and I am not aware that they dispose of them afterwards. (Conneau 1977:99-103).

In this passage one finds some interesting contradictions. On the one hand, the Baga are described as a people living “in their own solitary tribes” and “separate from the contact with other tribes.” Yet, on the other hand, the reference to a Fulbe law that protects them as salt producers hints at a closer contact with peoples of the interior. Furthermore, despite indicating that Baga do not marry outsiders, Conneau mentions that the Baga buy slave children of both sexes to adopt them (and hence, one may speculate, to eventually marry them). This is a crucial point which hints at the paradox of Baga slavery, the way in which slavery is both documented and denied: they buy human beings, but it is to make them Baga, not slaves. As we will see later in the thesis (Chapter Three and Chapter Seven), according to Baga logic, the concepts of Baga (*wibaka*) and slave (*wicar*) are mutually exclusive: a Baga is an individual who has neither been enslaved nor has ever owned slaves. But this is just a principle, and one that is often contested by reality, as we will have occasion to see.

The paradoxical view of Conneau, far from being an exception, offers, already in 1827, the kinds of contradictions that one finds in current discourses about "Baganess." The Baga, especially the Baga of the north (Sitem, Fore, Pokur), have internalized this stereotype of a mangrove people apart from the rest, and this is what they are inclined to present to the foreigner: an isolated, elusive, endogamous, and highly secretive Baga.⁷ It is my contention, in fact, that the Baga have not only found a refuge in the mangroves of the coast, but also that they have found a refuge in the stereotype of a mangrove people: a stereotype that they have known how to cultivate and manipulate in order to maintain and present the cultural ideal of an "independent people." The situation reminds us of that of the Maguzawa referred above, for whom "the pre-Islamic 'bush image' turns out to be a consciously cultivated stereotype and serves as a protective camouflage, while the interest in innovation serves to develop their existing 'niche', not to transform it" (Last 1980:6), or that of the Limba of Guinea/Sierra Leone, another group living on the political periphery of the Fulbe and Mande hinterland, whose "deep rural" strategies have recently been analysed by Richard Fanthorpe both historically and anthropologically (Fanthorpe 1998).

The Baga have indeed succeeded in finding (or creating) this protective camouflage for themselves in the swamps and forests of the Guinean coast. French Captain V. Brousmiche, who reported extensively on the trade of the Rio Nuñez and Rio Pongo, had only this little to say about the Baga:

The inhabitants of the riverside of Rio-Nunez and surrounding areas, as well as the Baga, the Nalu and the Landuma, are tributaries of the Almami of the Fouta. The Baga do not always pay their tribute, because the horsemen of the Almami would have difficulties to go and collect it given the topography of the country, sliced by streams thus making islands on whose banks the horses would sink in the mud (Brousmiche 1877:322; my translation).

⁷ Twenty years before Conneau, the British traveller Thomas Winterbottom had already described this Baga "isolation" and their lack of involvement in the Atlantic trade: "It is said of them" he wrote, "that they will not allow Europeans to settle among them; and the reason assigned for their conduct is, that they dislike the slave trade." (Winterbottom [1803] 1969, Vol I:5-6).

That the Baga were “protected” by the mangroves was not only a 19th century appreciation. Also in late-colonial administrative documents one often reads about the anger of administrators about the Baga “anarchy” and their use of the mangroves as a refuge from colonial control⁸. Still in 1957, Jacques Champaud, when doing a quick historical review, wrote:

After long campaigns during the first half of the 19th century, the chief from Labé had established in each Landuma village a representative in charge of tax collection, that is, of the annual tribute or *sagale*. Only the Baga, protected as they were by the forest and by the swamps, could maintain a certain independence and escape to this control (Champaud 1957:7; my translation).

But what remains very difficult to establish with the historical evidence at hand is the exact nature of such “protection.” While some authors speak of a natural protection, others, like Conneau, claimed that the Baga were protected by a Fulbe law and not only by water, mangrove trees and muddy shores. There is today a tendency among mangrove specialists to insist that mangrove inhabitants are not just “*refoulés*” (“pushed out”). (This is a conceptual view shared by earlier researchers [Pales 1947:134; Richard-Molard 1952:108-111], according to which the mangrove inhabitants were like “fossils” on whose shore the history of the continent would have stopped.) Geographer Marie-Christine Cormier-Salem, for instance, argues that mangrove swamp is but one more environment of West Africa, and its inhabitants, far from being “backward,” “primitives,” or “*refoulés*,” have been conscious agents strongly involved in the making of the Upper Guinea coast (Cormier-Salem 1994). While I agree with these researchers that the agency of the mangrove inhabitants has to be taken into consideration, I also think that the people living in the mangroves have been aware of the stereotype they have projected. More than in overcoming “primitivist” stereotypes (that I obviously do not endorse), what I am interested in is the way in which they are created and manipulated.

⁸ *Rapport Spécial: Le chef du Canton Baga* (Nov. 1932). *Archives Préfectorales de Boké*. Box “Canton Baga,” folder “*Almami Sidi*”: “He is in charge of a canton which is very difficult to administer. The Baga can hardly put up with the least authority, and they can easily find refuge in their islands, where they are very difficult to find.” (My translation).

2.4. The Baga “asylum”

Fifty years after Theophilus Conneau had visited the Baga, another French visitor, Lieutenant André Coffinières de Nordeck, visited them and pointed out the “asylum” that the Baga land offered to other peoples of the area, which again gives some support to the idea that “protection” was not only a natural phenomenon, but was accompanied by some social institutions as well:

In these lands, the *Bagataye* is considered as a place of asylum. One cannot fight in it, and indeed I have never seen a Baga with weapons. It is for this reason that the Baga did once give the territory of Kassan to the [Nalu] families of Camfarandi and Catinu so that they placed their slaves in complete security. When these two villages were destroyed, their inhabitants moved to Kassan. That explains the presence of this Nalu village among the Baga. Dinah [the Nalu king] told me a more convincing example of this right of asylum: (...) According to the laws of the country, his sister Mahmadi, widow of the late [Nalu] chief Bundu, should have married Bundu's son Karimu, but she refused to abide to such customs and fled to the Baga with her children. Karimu has promised to kill her if he ever finds her (Coffinières de Nordeck 1886:292; my translation and parentheses).

Unfortunately, this phenomenon of Baga “asylum” remains on the whole rather unexplored, even if one does find some scattered references to it in late 19th and early 20th century sources. For example, when discussing the formation of the Mikhifore group (originally a group of runaway slaves of the Fouta Djallon), Claude Maclaud also noted that the Baga and their neighbours Landuma granted asylum to slaves fleeing Fouta Djallon:

Those who could reach the frontiers [of Fouta] could still be captured by the Susu, who would sell them again to their [Fulbe] masters. The most fortunate ones were those who could reach the inhabited forest regions where they would live in savagery, or those who could reach the villages of the fetishist populations of the coast, like the Baga or the Landuma, who would grant them asylum (Maclaud 1906:22; my translation and parentheses).

And in that same year, French colonial administrator A. Chevrier wrote:

[The Baga] do not admit slavery and prefer death to the loss of freedom. They claim that they cannot live in captivity and that those among them who have

been taken as war prisoners and who have not been rebought by their family have not lived long. The runaway slaves from neighbouring countries who have come here asking for asylum, or those that they have bought, are admitted in the community as free country men (Chevrier 1906:370; my translation and parenthesis).

Sékouba Sinayoko, a Guinean school teacher who published his own oral historical fieldwork on the Baga Fore area of Monchon, recorded a story about a blacksmith from the north (i.e. from Guinea Bissau, according to Sinayoko) who arrived in Monchon together with his wife and their son, “in search for refuge in this land” (Sinayoko 1938:58). It was this northern blacksmith who taught the inhabitants of the region (who are not described as Baga but, surprisingly enough, as three Fulbe brothers from Timbo) the technique of palm wine tapping, as well as the technique of flooded-rice farming, which he brought from “his country” (Sinayoko 1938:58). It is quite significant that it was a blacksmith, the West African agent of transformation *par excellence*, who would teach those proto-Baga inhabitants of Monchon the two techniques that most define the Baga today: flooded-rice farming and palm-wine tapping⁹, thus transforming them from whatever they were into what today is considered as typically “Baga.” The story also testifies to the importance of northern “ethnic outsiders” as introducers of crucial cultural knowledge¹⁰. I return to this point and to Sinayoko’s story later.

Although, as I have said, this characteristic of the Bagatai as land of “asylum” remains unexplored, it has been mentioned by some scholars. Denise Paulme, after her ethnographic visit to the *Bagatai* in 1954, noted that:

⁹ I am aware of the contradiction between this and my claim in the Introduction that Baga men drink palm wine but rarely tap it. In fact, Baga used to tap their own wine. It was only in the late 1950s that tapping was abandoned, but the stereotype of Baga as palm (and raphia) wine tappers dies hard. A recently introduced match box portraying a palm wine tapper carrying palm wine has been baptised in the whole Guinean territory as “*les allumettes bagas*,” i.e.: the Baga matches. It would not surprise me if in a few years the younger generation started tapping again.

¹⁰ For a general treatment of strangers as introducers of ritual knowledge see Barnes 1990. Among the Baga, it is normally said that flooded-rice farming was introduced by Guinea Bissauan Balantas.

There is room to presume that this inhospitable region has for a long time offered a refuge for the defeated, some of whom would have come with wives and children while others would have married after the arrival. (Paulme 1957:260; my translation).

Furthermore, the Baga Sitem scholar Sékou Béka Bangoura concludes:

The Sitem country thus appears to the eyes of its inhabitants as an asylum for refugees who have not forgotten their origins. (Bangoura 1972:23; my translation).

2.5. The *Bagatai*, a “pagan” landscape

Having discussed these scattered allusions to the land of the Baga as an asylum, let us return our attention to the ecology and its role in discourses of Baga identity. First, as I said in the Introduction, a common etymology of “Baga” is that of *ba ka* (“inhabitants of the sea,” in Susu). Whether this etymology is true or false is difficult for us to determine, but it is interesting in any case to discover the popular perception of the Baga as inhabitants of the sea, as well as its opposition to the concept of *Jalon ka* (or Jalonke, Yalunka, etc.) or inhabitants of the *Jalon* (i.e. the Fouta Djallon)¹¹.

Second, a further key element of the Baga landscape that needs special attention is the silk-cotton tree. The silk-cotton tree is of ritual significance among many African peoples. On the coast of Guinea it is particularly associated with West-Atlantic speaking groups, and most particularly with the Baga. In his dissertation on Baga rice farming, Théodore Camara described the silk-cotton tree as:

This enormous sacred tree that has always provided refuge to the Baga people; it is under the silk-cotton tree that most Baga ceremonies would take place, so that other ethnic groups would not dare to approach whenever they were in the

¹¹ The Jalonke, today almost extinct as both culture and language, are the descendants of the non-Fulbe inhabitants of the Fouta Djallon prior to the arrival of the Fulbe. A few of them still live in some small villages of the Fouta. The Jalonke speak a Mande language, very similar to Susu. The only ethnography I know of about the Jalonke is Mohamed Saidou N'daou's Ph.D. thesis (N'daou 1993).

Baga land. In fact, approaching most silk-cotton trees was forbidden to most strangers, wherever they came from. (Camara 1966:50; my translation).

The role of silk-cotton trees as boundary markers and as places of worship among Guinean coast populations is surely very old. It was observed and carefully described by the Jesuit Manuel Alvares as early as 1615:

Of all the trees, the highest and the thickest, and the one with most branches, is the tree called *poulan*¹². It is planted over a puppy dog, whose blood has first been poured into the ground; so the tree, as it grows, is regarded as an idol by the heathen, and serves as a boundary mark for villages. No walnut tree or chestnut tree in Europe, however large, is as big as the *poulan* (...). Of the many different trees here, there is no bigger, and it is the one which is planted to mark the boundaries of land. (Alvares [c. 1615] 1986a, Part Two:7; translated from Portuguese by Paul Hair).

It is noteworthy that Alvares was present at the time when the Mane overlords were eagerly looking for captives to sell to European slavers. One might therefore ask whether the creation of this forest by the oppressed coastal communities (Sape, etc.) could not be interpreted as a protection against these external pressures, especially given the “magical” attributes of the silk-cotton tree. As Eve Crowley has recently reminded us, the coastal forests “served as a shield against European intrusions from the Atlantic ocean” (Crowley 1997:4)¹³.

The Portuguese historian, anthropologist and colonial administrator Avelino Teixeira da Mota also wrote on the cultural significance of the silk-cotton tree for the Upper

¹² *Poulan*, the word given by Alvares, was probably the Sape word for this tree. We will see that similar words are used by present-day speakers in the Upper Guinea coast, but not by the Baga Sitem, who, despite numerous similarities with examples of Sape words offered by Alvares, call the silk-cotton tree *kawɛ* (pl. *cawɛ*).

¹³ The protection offered by big trees such as the silk-cotton tree or the baobab was not only “magical” but quite literal too. A missionary legend asserts that the Koniagui (living on the border between Guinea and Senegal) converted quite early to Christianity because the French, during a military expedition in 1904, had cut down with a cannon ball the baobab in which they had climbed. This, according to missionaries, convinced them of the power of the white people’s god. See the report in *Bulletin de la Congrégation des PP. du St-Esprit*, Vol. 13 (1911-1912): 770.

Guinea coast. Drawing upon the unfinished unpublished research by the geographer Jacques Richard-Molard¹⁴, da Mota observed that the word *polom*, which means silk-cotton tree in Kriulo (Guinea Bissauan Creole), is possibly linked to the root “*bulom*” that is to be found along the whole Upper Guinea coast to designate either the swampy low lands, the tidal creeks, the flooded-rice fields (*bulonhas* in Kriulo) or the people living in these areas (cf. for instance the word *bulongic* to designate the Baga Fore people):

In Guinea Bissau one finds furthermore that the root “*bulom*” designates some spirits among the Papeis and Beafades, which allows us to conclude that the word *poilão* (*polom* in Kriulo), used to designate the sacred trees (*Ceiba pentandra*) that protect the houses and villages and constitute refuge for spirits as well as ritual places, is also derived from it. Geography, way of life, and animism are thus intimately linked through this curious root! (da Mota 1954, vol I:286; my translation).

It is precisely this “animistic geography,” this mixture of mangroves, silk-cotton trees, and oil palms (as well palm wine) that has given the Baga their coastal character. Silk-cotton trees, together with the initiatory spirit *amanco ngopon* were among the main objectives for destruction by the Muslim preacher Asekou Sayon and his partisans in their *jihad* against Baga “animism” in 1956/57 (see Chapter Five). Yet, we are not talking in this chapter about the *destruction*, but rather about the *making* of a Baga cultural identity.

2.6. Baga oppositions to the Fulbe

In this section, I discuss some legends that testify to the Baga exploitation of their mangrove environment as a means of protection, notably against the Fulbe raiders.

¹⁴ Jacques Richard-Molard. 1947 (unpublished). *Quelques variations d'un radical "Sénégal-Guinéen et leur interet pour la géographie humaine des "Rivières du Sud."* (Non vidi). Cited in da Mota 1954 vol I:285-86. After Richard-Molard and Teixeira da Mota, the theme of the “*bulom* root” and the cultural unity that it supposedly reflects was taken up by Walter Rodney (Rodney 1970:16 and *passim*).

There is a common Baga legend which refers to the tidal creeks that separate one village from another. Whoever tries to cross the creek speaking Fulfulde (the Fulbe language) will be instantly drowned by the spirit of the waters (cf. Bangoura, [ed.]. nd.: 14).

A story documented (if not invented) by missionaries Arsène Mell and Raymond Lerouge is still told in the Baga Fore region of Monchon and surrounding villages. According to this story, a group of some thirty Fulbe men got lost in the mangrove and were killed by the Baga in an ambush. The skulls of these Fulbe, together with a horse head, were kept in a hut under the supervision of Kamphori Yura, a famous ritual specialist who died in the late 1920s and whose feats remain alive in Baga memory¹⁵. “They are here” said Yura to Lerouge when he first showed the skulls to him, “to remind the Baga of the protection that they have been granted against their enemies from the east” (Lerouge 1917:103; my translation). In a later visit, Yura explained to Lerouge:

These Fulbe wanted to kill us, but they did not know our swamps; they sank into the mud. When all of them were stuck in the mud, the elders from Monchon came with large knives and killed them as easily as when we cut the heads of the rice plants when they become yellow... Later on the vultures had a feast. They did not leave anything but the bones. There they are... *Allah nun Porto-Mori Foulahs mabiriria!* (“God and the Priest against the Fulbe”) (Lerouge 1930:10-11; my translation).

In an annual ritual, according to a description found in the journals of Father Mell, who became well acquainted with Kamphori Yura, Baga men would gather in this hut and would drink palm-wine using one of the skulls as a vessel (Lerouge 1926:150). In this action one finds a characteristically Baga ambiguity towards the Fulbe: they kill them, but they drink from their heads. It is also worth noting that they drink palm wine, an alcoholic beverage and therefore an anti-Muslim element.

¹⁵ A picture of this hut showing the human skulls and Yura is kept in the photography section of the *Archives des Pères du St.-Esprit*, in the Congregation’s *maison mère* in Paris. Picture number: B 765 (“*chez le sorcier*”).

However, it is also worth noting, as a caution, that this interesting story has arrived to us by these two Catholic missionaries who befriended Yura, a heavy palm wine drinker who in the last year of his life converted to Christianity. It is likely that Yura told them such an anti-Muslim story because he knew that they would like it. In fact, the same hut with human skulls appeared almost thirty years later in the work of another missionary, namely in the novel that Father Paul Bernier wrote inspired in his own apostolate in Boffa in the late 1940s (Bernier 1955:133-134¹⁶). The description of the hut and of the skulls given by Bernier in his novel is very similar to that of Mell and Lerouge. In the novel, however, the skulls are not of Fulbe men but of members of the same ethnic group killed in internal warfare. In any case, the collection of skulls among the Baga and their use as beakers had been described as early as 1594 by the Portuguese André Alvares d'Almada (d'Almada [1954] 1964), although unfortunately he did not provide any information about where the skulls came from.

A story I was told in Mare (a Baga Sitem village) related to a Baga hero who had chased away the Fulbe raiders by simply placing some recently tapped palm wine in their path. The fermentation of the fresh liquid led the Fulbe to believe that this was a liquid which was actually *boiling* without any fire underneath; they feared this was sorcery and were put to flight.¹⁷

Baga cultural and geographical distancing from the Fulbe is very present in narratives and in interpretations of different cultural phenomena. When discussing the shape of the Baga house, which used to be until recently, rounded or rather elliptical, Theodore Camara states that the *kulo kabaka* ("Baga house") of today is rectangular so that it is clearly differentiated from the round *diglina*, the Fulbe house (Camara 1966:45). Whether it is historically true or not that the shape of the Baga house has changed in order to be contrasted to the rounded Fulbe houses would be difficult to prove, but that

¹⁶ Father Bernier's novel is the development of a script he wrote for Maurice Cloche's film *Un Missionnaire* (France, 1955), which is a unique, albeit rather unknown, document for historians of Boffa, of colonial Guinea, and of African Catholicism in general.

¹⁷ The same Baga trick, as we will see, appears in the story recorded by Sékouba Sinayoko (1938:59).

a Baga scholar gives such an interpretation in a dissertation written for an international readership is in itself very telling.

This process of cultural differentiation is not only a distancing process but also quite the opposite, in that the Fulbe are always explicitly present in the equation. The relationship between the Baga and the Fulbe is in fact a very ambivalent one. As would be expected of a people who defines their identity by opposition to another one, the Baga need the Fulbe in order to juxtapose their own world to the Fulbe. Thus, when one asks the Baga why they have two scarifications on their cheeks, right under the eyes, they sometimes answer “because the Fulbe have them at the sides of the eyes.” This is not entirely true, since the “pure Fulbe” (the free Muslim men and women of the Fouta) do not have any scarifications at all (they consider them a non-Muslim practice). The inhabitants of the Fouta who do have facial scarifications are the serfs of the “pure Fulbe.” But Baga people do not normally make any distinction between them. As far as the Baga are concerned, all inhabitants of the Fouta, whether they are free Muslim Fulbe or their serfs, are Fulbe, *wifula* (pl. *afula*) as the Baga say.

This ambiguity towards anything Fulbe is also to be found in Baga art, particularly in their female *nimba* mask. The above-mentioned missionary Raymond Lerouge, who had attended a *nimba* masquerade in the Baga Sitem village of Kufen in 1912, had observed the puzzling similarity between the *nimba* profile and a typical Fulbe one (Lerouge 1911-1912). More recently, American art historian Frederick Lamp has seen *nimba* iconography and performance as an appropriation of the Fulbe spirit, as a symbolic wedding between the Baga and their enemy (Lamp 1996b:176-179). Whether Lamp’s interpretations convince us or not, it remains true that some Baga informants happily acknowledged to me that the *nimba* headdress represented a Fulbe woman, because, they explained, it came from the Fouta, like everything Baga. Nigel Barley reports that the Dowayo of Cameroon, whose identity may also be interpreted “as an explicit opposition to Fulbe political and religious pressures” (Burnham 1996:55), have a transvestite representation of an old Fulbe woman, although in their case the

performance certainly cannot be interpreted as a wedding but rather as a funeral, as the Dowayo end up by killing the old woman (Barley 1983:60-62).

2.7. Of origins and crowns: The presence of the Fouta in the Baga

We may conclude from the above that the Baga define their identity by a consistent disassociation from the Fouta, but at the same time that they need the memory of the Fouta well inscribed in their culture. It is as though they want to move away from the Fouta, but carry the Fouta with them, as they have carried (according to informants) their art, their *amanco*, the semi-floating rice (which they call *malɔ ma baka*, “the rice of the Baga,” not to be confused with the mangrove rice, called *malɔ ma daale* or “the rice of the fields”), and almost everything else¹⁸.

According to oral and written sources, as we have indicated, the Baga people consider themselves to have come from the Fouta Djallon. Neither the Baga villagers nor the intellectual spokesmen of the community question their ethnicity. For them, the Baga are as “Baga” now in the mangroves as they were “Baga” when they were in the Fouta, and probably before, although the evidence of a Baga society and identity in places other than where they are now is never provided. The Baga say that they left the Fouta Djallon in order to go to the coast following the arrival of the Fulbe people in the Fouta, and especially the forced Islamisation that took place from 1727 onwards. Their migration (whether real or mythical) would fall into the category of “migration as a form of religious resistance,” singled out and analysed by historian of religions

¹⁸ Not exactly “everything” else was brought in their migrations. The Baga acknowledge that a few things were found on the coast after their arrival, and most notably mangrove rice and Baga languages. The mangrove rice (*malo ma daale*), farmed with the characteristically Baga spade called *kɔp* (Fig 1 and 2), is today more widely used than the semi-floating rice (*malo ma baka*). Most Baga know that it obviously could not have been brought from elsewhere, although given the importance of the *kɔp* in defining a Baga identity, some informants told me that the Baga were already using the *kɔp* when they were in the Fouta Djallon some centuries ago. As to their languages, informants normally claimed that languages were taught them by the spirits of the places where different ancestors settled, this being the reason why there are so many Baga languages and dialects (apparently, each spirit spoke its own language or dialect.)

Cristiano Grotanelli (Grotanelli 1985:17-19). A good example of this view is found in the compilation of oral history recently edited by Mohammed Bangoura:

The Baga [when they were still in the Fouta], aware of the Fulbe threat, decided to strengthen the unity around their Supreme Spirit Amantsho [*amanco ngopon*] and to reject any tentative link of conversion suggested by the sovereign of the Fulbe. They decided to use all their fetishist power in order to respond to the attack of the Fulbe strangers (Bangoura [ed.]. nd.:10; my translation and parentheses).

As we know, their “fetishist” power was not enough to resist the Fulbe. The Fulbe conquered the Fouta, created the state of Fouta Djallon with capital in Timbo, and the Baga had to flee. The *jihad* in the Fouta Djallon was declared in 1727, although the bloodiest years were from 1750 onwards (Botte 1988).

If this were true (i.e., if the Baga emerged from a migration that took place in the 18th century) one would have to wonder why the Baga on the coast are already mentioned in the earliest pre-colonial sources, such as d’Almada. In fact, while I think that the Fulbe *jihad* in the 18th century probably chased away non-Muslim inhabitants of the Fouta, I do not think that it had much to do with the genesis of the Baga, as they are reported to be on the coast since at least three centuries earlier than that.

However, the insistence of many informants (especially old, Muslim ones) that the Baga come from the Fouta has to be carefully listened to. Although I do not believe that the Fouta and the Fulbe *jihad* can be the ultimate explanations of “where did the Baga come from?”, the Fouta narratives probably express some pre-colonial relationship between the *Bagatai* and the Fouta. One thing that became apparent in my fieldwork was that informants tended to group the Baga villages in sets of “provinces” (for lack of a better word, for they did not have neither a Baga nor a French term for this territorial category). The reasons behind this territorial partition were never clarified. Some informants claimed that the partition was purely linguistic; others said that it was done according to the order of arrival of ancestors into the *Bagatai*; others claimed that it corresponded to who the male initiatory spirit was and to whether initiations into manhood were celebrated together, in which case they could be considered as “spirit

provinces”¹⁹; still others would claim that each province was created according to the origin place from which the founding ancestor of each province is supposed to have come. This is a list of the provinces I was able to single out:

2.7.1. *Mantung* (or *Mantung-Simantor*).

This province is comprised of the three Baga Sitem villages of Bukor, Kufen and Kalikse. One should add to them the “satellite” villages of Danci (born from a fission from Bukor), Cita and Kalik (fissions from Kufen) and Sibal (from Kalikse). This group, of which Bukor is the biggest village (and the “first” in order of foundation, according to most informants from the villages), claims to have come from Timbi Madina (in the Fouta Djallon). Other than a common origin they share the same dialect of the Baga Sitem dialect (*cimantung*). However, there are subdialectal differences between Bukor and *Simantor* (a term referring to the villages of Kufen and Kalikse together). According to my oldest informants, the three villages used to initiate their boys together. But at some point, not too distant, there was a fission between the two groups. Bukor celebrated its last initiation, with the apparition of *amanco ngopon*, in 1946. Kufen and Kalikse held a common one in 1952. The *amanco ngopon* of this group was known as *somtup*, and it was shared by other groups.

2.7.2. *Tako*

This is a group made up of the villages of Katako, Mare and Kakilenc. This group claims to have its origin in Labé (in the Fouta Djallon), to which they sometimes refer enigmatically as *Sèbè Labé* (*Sèbè* meaning “to write”). They speak the same Baga Sitem dialect (*citako*) with no subdialectal variations whatsoever. The three villages

¹⁹ “Spirit province” is a territorial unity depending on a single spirit that regulates initiation rites into manhood. I take the term from Eve Crowley (Crowley 1990:215). Crowley claims that belonging to a spirit province gives individuals a powerful sense of belonging, and that spirit provinces should be considered as “moral communities” in Durkheimian terms, given the strong sense of identity that its belonging provides to its members (Crowley 1990:480).

used to practice initiation together (last time in 1948). They used to share *amanco ngopon*, which they called, like the people of *Mantung*, *somtup*.

2.7.3. *Katifin*

These are the Baga Sitem villages of Kawass, Katongoro and some lineages of Tolkoc. This group claims an origin in Timbo, as do the Baga Fore. In fact some lineages of Katongoro do come from the Baga Fore village of Monchon. In 1995 I interviewed an old man from Katongoro who could still remember the song that the Baga sang when they left Timbo²⁰. These villages, too, used to share a single initiation ritual and *amanco ngopon* and have their own Baga Sitem dialect (*citifin*). Their *amanco ngopon* was called *bikilinc*.

2.7.4. *Abunu*

These are the villages of Tolkoc together with the small village of Falaba and some lineages in Yampon (a village in the south, in Boffa Prefecture). They have their own Baga Sitem dialect, perceived by many of my informants, for reasons never clarified, to be the “purest” Baga Sitem. The origin of this group is very contested and not usually spoken about, certainly not in public. In fact, the *Abunu* are considered as strangers by many of the other Baga groups. According to some sources (Sompère 1990), they have a northern origin, coming from Bundu (in Senegal)²¹, hence their name (*Abunu* being a deformation of *Abundu*, “the people from Bundu”). Some informants, though, placed their origin in ethnic groups of the hinterland of the Guinean territory. The fact that they

²⁰The relationship between the Fouta and initiation songs remains as yet unexplored. I was often told that the memory of the Fouta was passed down from generation to generation in songs taught during initiation rites. Unfortunately these are issues the initiated elders are not quite ready to discuss openly.

²¹A northern, Senegalese origin for Baga groups is not so rare. See also the unpublished piece by colonial administrator Brière (Brière 1915) for a similar origin of the Baga Koba.

are considered as strangers (with more than a hint that they were actually “slaves”²²) should not mean that they are necessarily despised by other Baga. In fact, the Abunu are said to be the introducers of *Abol*, the female counterpart of *amanco ngopon*, a spirit that today has ritual specialists in every Baga Sitem village.

2.7.5. *Dukfissa*

This is a group formed by the Baga Sitem villages of Kamsar and its satellite village of Calgbonto. Kamsar is today an important mining port, a highly developed town harbouring around 50,000 inhabitants and becoming a model of development for the whole Guinean territory. The ancient Baga village of Kamsar was destroyed in the early 1970s in order to build the modern city (founded 1973) and the original inhabitants were resettled elsewhere, either in other Baga villages or in the “Bagatai,” a neighbourhood of Kamsar outside the limits of the *cité*, which houses the 4,000 factory and port workers.

People from *Dukfissa* (a word of unclear etymology) normally minimise the importance of their origin. Today, what informants like to insist upon is the fact that Kamsar was (and is) the “capital” of the Baga, and that it is in Kamsar that the most important ritual meetings concerning the whole of the *Bagatai* do take place. It is interesting to note that the modernization of Kamsar (and therefore of the Baga, since every Guinean knows quite rightly that Kamsar “belongs” to the Baga) is accompanied by a parallel development of the secrecy and “magic” that surrounds the Baga. Thus, when the Baga say that Kamsar is the “capital” of the Baga, in fact they are not so much thinking about Kamsar itself as they are in fact thinking of *Mpame*. *Mpame* is an invisible city situated in a “parallel reality” invisible to the human eyes, but almost certainly located around Kamsar (the location of *Mpame* was once pointed out to me in a grove some hundred metres beyond Kamsar’s limits). It was once described to me by a Kissi intellectual of

²²A Baga Sitem song carefully recorded and transcribed by Lerouge in Katako accused the *Abunu* of having been the first Baga people to initiate slaves (*acar*) and to mix slaves with free Baga (Lerouge 1935:11). See Chapter Three.

Conakry as the biggest sorcery capital (“*capital des sorciers*”) of West Africa, a place where witches from different countries gather to celebrate their sinister meetings. This development of *Mpame*, parallel to the industrial development of Kamsar, seems to support what some authors like Jean-Pierre Dozon or Peter Geschiere have written about the “re-enchantment” of the world that modernization brings about in Africa, challenging the Weberian approach that would regard modernization as the “disenchantment of the world” (Dozon 1995, Geschiere 1995; cf. also Shaw 1997 for a similar development of a “global witch-city” among the Temne). For the Baga, this projection of a sorcery landscape over the modern town of Kamsar has meant the deeper development of their “niche,” and the increase rather than the undermining of their reputation as masters of magical and mysterious resources.

2.7.6. *Baga Fore*

The Baga Fore live in the villages of Monchon, Kifinda and Bongolon. This group is said to have come from Timbo. They have their own language, Cilogits, completely different from any other Baga language. They had their own *amanco ngopon*, called *kombo*.

2.7.7. *Baga Pokur*

This is the group made up by Minar and Mbotin villages. This Pokur group claims to have come from Binani (in the Fouta Djallon). They too have their own language, also different from the other Baga languages, and again they used to initiate their boys with their own *amanco ngopon*, called *pincamam*.

We can summarise the information gathered so far in the next table, indicating the name of each “province”, their place of origin in Fouta or elsewhere, the language or dialect spoken, whether the group is or not a “spirit province” (i.e.; whether they used to initiate the youths together) and the name of the male initiatory spirit (*amanco ngopon* being a generic one):

<i>Baga group (province)</i>	<i>Place of origin</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Spirit province</i>	<i>Name of amanco ngopon</i>
1. Baga Mandori	?	Mandori (Similar to Citem)	?	?
2. Dukfissa	---	Citem (dialect 1)	yes	<i>somtup</i>
3. Katifin	Timbo	Citem (dialect 2)	yes	<i>bikilinc</i>
4. Abunu	Bundu	Citem (dialect 3)	yes	<i>bikilinc</i>
5. Tako	Labé	Citem (dialect 4)	yes	<i>somtup</i>
6. Mantung	Timbi-Madina	Citem (dialect 5)	yes/no	<i>somtup</i>
6.1. Bukor		Citem (subdial. 5.1)		
6.2. Simantor		Citem (subdial. 5.2)		
7. Baga Pokur	Binani	Baga Pokur	yes	<i>pincaman</i>
8. Baga Fore	Timbo	Cilongic	yes	<i>kombo</i>
9. Baga Kakissa	Timbo	Kakissa (Similar to Citem)	?	?

The exact relationship of each of these groups with their “place of origin” in the Fouta is so far not clear. It seems to me that the Fouta works like a totemic reference to further differentiate groups, which are also different in terms of language and of initiation rite. It is possible that the founders of a particular province (if they were founded by a single lineage) did come from the Fouta, but it is also possible that the straightforward narrative of origin hides a much more complex set of political and trading relationships. To support this, I would like to draw the reader’s attention to a few scattered references to Baga royal crowns, linked in one way or another to the Fouta.

In a letter found in the Prefectural Archives of Boffa, written in the early 1950s, the representatives of Dupru (a Baga Kakissa village) were asking the *commandant de cercle* of Boffa to recreate the then recently annulled Canton Sobané (which comprised the Baga Kakissa villages). In the letter, they explained that they did not want to be part of the Canton Monchon (in which many Baga Kakissa villages had been included after the Canton Sobané was annulled) because there were too many Susu people there, and the Susu were, according to this letter, the “guests” of the Baga. They claimed that theirs was an area inhabited only by Baga people, and recalled having had too many

wars against the Susu. The letter finished with an interesting reference to these wars and to an enigmatic crown:

We have had wars against Kolissokho and Lakhata. Thia? No wars with them. It is they who have crowned us. They themselves have the crown of Timbo (...). The Baga must have a Baga chief.²³ (My translation).

This letter testifies to an intermediary political role played by the Susu kings of Thia between the Baga Kakissa and the Fulbe from Timbo, a situation that needs further examination. I should add that the few Baga Kakissa individuals I could still meet in Guinea claimed that the origin of their group was also in Timbo.

In the Baga Sitem village of Bukor (in *Mantung*) I was also told that there is a crown that the *Amantung* ("people of *Mantung*") had carried with them from the Fouta in their migration. References to other crowns, namely to those of the provinces of *Tako* and the Baga Fore, are commented upon below.

Since the pre-colonial Baga political system (especially that of the Baga groups we are discussing here) is that of an acephalous society²⁴, this insistence on crowns is indeed puzzling. Sékou Béka Bangoura had already observed this paradox in his dissertation:

"*Timbo*" would come from the deformation of the Sitem word for "cap." For the holders of this hypothesis, the cap is the symbol of the crown, of the

²³Letter signed by Soriba Bangoura Poukhoun from Douprou, n.d., but *circa* 1952. Prefectural Archives of Boffa. Box "*Canton Sobané*." 1 page. For the wars between the Baga Kakissa and the Susu mentioned in this letter, see the anonymous article in *La Voix de Notre-Dame* by J.B. (B.J. 1927). I suspect the author was Father Jean Bondalaz, from the Mission of Boffa.

²⁴ Peter McLachlan, who visited the Baga in 1821, had written in no uncertain terms: "The natives who reside at Capachez [that is, the Baga Sitem and the Baga Pokur] are (...) poor and miserable, and in a shocking state of barbarism; they have no kings nor headmen." (McLachlan 1821:13). Yet, in another part of his narrative, referring probably to the Baga of other regions, he paradoxically pointed out that "The only Mahometans among the Bagas are the chiefs; but from their general conduct, I suspect, they are Pagans in their hearts—few of them indeed can be said to be well versed in Arabic" (McLachlan 1821:8; Page numbers are from Bruce Mouser's typed version. An edition of Peter McLachlan's work, with notes by Mouser and myself will appear in the University of Leipzig Papers on Africa series in 1999).

chieftaincy. Thus, all the Baga coming from Timbo would be the holders of the power to enthrone the chiefs of their village (but they could not be chiefs themselves).

As far as we are concerned, this hypothesis appears difficult to subscribe to in as much as we observe the absence among the Baga Sitem of a centralised political power. (Bangoura 1972:12; my translation).

Bangoura goes on to present an alternative etymology for the word *timbo*:

The second hypothesis seems likely (...). "*Timbo*" would come from the deformation of "*timba*" or "*tamba*," a sacred drum of Baga sacred bushes. This agrees with the etymology given by the Nalu, who claim that "*timbo*" comes from the word "*matimba*," equally the sacred drum of Nalu secret societies. Whenever there is a ritual ceremony, the *timba* and *matimba* would call the initiated into the sacred forest (Bangoura 1972:12; my translation).

It is noteworthy that the two etymologies attempt to appropriate the Fulbe Timbo to Baga culture, whether making its name stem from their word for "cap" or from their word for "sacred drum." Unfortunately, this kind of etymologies are easily reversed. While it is true that the word *timbo* may come from a Baga word (whether "cap" or "drum"), it is equally possible that these two words come from the word Timbo, whatever its origin is. In any case, let us keep in mind that there is an association, reflected in words and in popular etymologies, between the capital of the Fouta state (Timbo), Baga sacred bushes (*timba*) and Baga "caps" (*timbi*). Caps and turbans are powerful Muslim symbols, and it is likely that if ever Baga chiefs have been imposed by Fulbe overlords, they would have been "crowned" with a turban or a cap.

Whatever the etymology of *timbo* is, leaving aside the justified hesitations of scholars to admit the presence of crowns among the Baga, the fact remains that Baga crowns appear in several historical narratives and their existence cannot be ruled out without further research. Adolphe Kande Camara, for instance, describes how the "magical crown" of the Tako province was once transferred from the people of *Kansomble* (one of the three wards of the village of Katako) to the people of *Dikawɛ* (the ward that eventually was to yield the colonial "*chefs de canton*"). According to this story, it was the wife of the last chief from *Kansomble*, a woman from a *Dikawɛ* lineage, who, being

barren and unable to reproduce her husband's royal lineage, stole the crown and gave it to her own people of *Dikawę* when her husband passed away (Camara 1990:65). The crown mentioned in this story had a limited sovereignty over Tako, a territorial unity (a "province" in my language) to which the author refers using the French word *ethnie*.

Do these traditions of "crowns" represent wishful thinking on behalf of a peripheral "stateless" society? Or do Baga crowns really exist? With the available data at hand the truth is impossible to establish. Even if the existence of a crown could be proved beyond any reasonable doubt, we would still have to establish what the effective power of its owners was. If these "kings" were (as I am led to believe) chosen by the Fulbe overlords of the Fouta or by intermediary Susu (such as the Thia kings, as testified by the letter quoted previously), then there is reason to think that their power would be rather limited and probably restrained by a council of initiated elders. In which case, there would have been no real contradiction between the presence of the crown and the acephalousness of the Baga society. The meetings of initiated ritual specialists elected from different lineages would have existed and be even more powerful than the kings themselves in that they would be able to restrain and check their authority.

The most obvious reference to a crown among the Baga and to its direct links with the Fouta is to be found in the story collected by Sinayoko referred to above. As noted previously, three Fulbe men left the Fouta and settled in the region of Monchon.²⁵ When the oldest of them died, their sons, who had become palm-wine drinkers and mangrove rice farmers (or, to put it in one word, "Baga"), broke all links with Timbo. This was perceived as an outrage by Timbo's authorities and accordingly they sent an army to regain control of that frontier region. At first, the Fulbe army was defeated by the defectors of Monchon with the trick of the "palm wine boiling," but eventually Timbo's warriors managed to regain control of the

²⁵Three appears to be the ideal number present in migration narratives ("There were three brothers departing together from the Fouta...") and in Baga social structure. The biggest *amanco ngopon* (*somtup*) controls three provinces (*Dufissa*, *Takq*, and *Mantung*). The biggest provinces, *Mantung*, *Takq*, *Katifin*, and the Baga Fore contain three villages each. Most Baga villages have three *cibanka* (wards), and most *cibanka* contain three lineages.

region. They selected a man from the lineage of Ndiopon to be the king and “the Baga Fore entered under the tutelage of the Fulbe” (Sinayoko 1938:60). The crown mentioned in this story had a limited sovereignty over the province of the Baga Fore, and not over the whole of the Baga peoples. Unfortunately, how long this Fulbe tutelage of the Baga Fore lasted was not recorded in the story. It is not difficult to imagine that the king appointed by Timbo’s lords at the end of the story would eventually start to drink palm wine and to farm mangrove rice....

Jack Goody, discussing a similar situation between the by and large acephalous Tallensi and their neighbouring centralised state of Mamprusi in the north of Ghana today, spoke of an “ebb and flow of boundaries (or rather of control areas)” of centralised states (Goody 1977:344). It is equally possible for the Baga (or for some of them at any rate), given a similar “ebb and flow” of Fulbe controlled areas, to have at some point been directly controlled by Fulbe authorities who would have nominated a man or a whole lineage to be their paramount chiefs. But certainly more historical and regional research is necessary before settling all these issues and establishing the exact relationship between the different Baga provinces and the Fouta metropolises with which they appear to be linked, either in terms of origin narratives or in terms of crowns and political connections.

2.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that the *Bagatai*, a land of swamps and forests, of fearsome “fetishes,” and of salt and rice production has been a refuge area on the fringes of hinterland societies. Refuge areas are typically characterised by a progressive incorporation of strangers and by the presence of demanding activities (such as flooded-rice farming and salt extraction in our case) which make the stranger welcome wherever he or she may be coming from. Even if the different Baga groups present themselves as having had nothing to do with either slavery or slave trading, there is reason to think that at some points in their history there have been links between them and the main centres of the Fouta Djallon: Timbo, Timbi Madina, Labé. It is easy to

suspect a connection between the activities Baga were specialised in (especially salt extraction, but also the production of palm oil, the collection of kola nuts, and probably the farming of rice) and the trading activities of the Fulbe people. A historical and regional analysis could maybe provide more details about the trading links between each Baga province and its respective Fouta centre, and would probably help understand the making of a Baga cultural identity on the fringes of the “ebb and flow” of Fulbe controlled areas.

Whatever the historical case may be, pre-colonial reports such as Conneau’s, according to which the Baga were “separate from the contact of other tribes” (Conneau 1977:99), still resonate in present-day Baga self-presentation; Baga like to insist that they never had any slaves and they never engaged in the Atlantic trade. They present the “pagan” element of their culture as a crucial element in defending their cultural identity against the Fulbe, at least in the past. As we will see, however, the end of the Fouta Djallon state in the late 19th century and the imposition of a new colonial rule, against whose pressure the tidal creeks and the “fetishist” powers could not do much, meant a new context in which being “animist” had not much sense (even if, at times, the French much preferred to rule over “animist” populations than over Muslim ones). By the 1950s, after some sixty years of colonial rule, the Baga were literally “tired” of being the “animist” group of the coast of Guinea. But before telling this part of their story (see Chapters Four and Five), I want to give, in the following chapter, some additional ethnographic elements of their social life in the mangroves.

Chapter 3

Social institutions

3.1. Introduction

This chapter describes general aspects of Baga social life. Most of the data presented in it belongs to the Baga Sitem, among whom my fieldwork was carried out, although comparisons with, or references to, other Baga groups will not be excluded. I shall start with the description of the structuring units of any Baga village (the house, the lineage, and the local category called *abanka*), and then move to more institutional levels of power and ideology. The chapter is not intended to provide a whole Baga ethnography, but rather to make explicit a series of ideal typical models necessary to understand the dynamics of age and power struggles analysed in the remainder of the thesis.

3.2. The village, the *abanka*, and the lineage

A Baga village (*antof*; pl. *ntof*) is divided into the village *stricto sensu* (*dare*; pl. *sidaare*) and the rice fields that surround it (*daale*; pl. *sidaale*). *Antof* means at the same time land, earth, and village. It is the most general territorial concept in Baga Sitem language, apart from *dwuru* (literally “outside” but also meaning “the world out there”) and the widespread Arabic *dunia* (the world). The rice fields are situated in the alluvial lands, and constitute polders gained from the mangrove. Many villages that are nowadays connected to other ones through wide dikes, giving the impression that they belong to the same *terre ferme*, were in fact separated by water only twenty or thirty years ago, when the use of canoes was required to go from one village to another. Nowadays only three or four villages are isolated from the rest in distant islands. But even if most villages are now mutually reachable on foot (at least in the dry season), all villages are also connected through the tidal creeks (known in the literature as *marigots*¹), and the use of canoes to go from one village to another is still, by and large,

¹I shall not use the word “*marigot*” because I find it most confusing. In French scientific literature *marigots* are the tidal creeks. But in Guinean French (at least at the colloquial, and

the most common way to travel. All Baga know each creek very well and to what villages it may lead to. Each creek and each intersection of creeks has its name. As opposed to the wild bush, the mangrove is a very humanised landscape where Baga feel most at ease and indeed very protected. Yet, the importance of the mangrove and of the sea in the shaping of a Baga *ethos* has usually been minimised by researchers, who see the Baga people as merely rice farmers and as descendants of former inhabitants of the continental hinterland.²

The village *stricto sensu* (*dare*) consists of a cluster of mud houses of homogeneous construction (rectangular, with a veranda and an average of five rooms). The shape of the village varies depending on the type of territory on which they are built, some more sandy than others. Monchon (the biggest Baga Fore village), like Kifinda and other Baga Fore villages, is a long village, with only one alley and two rows of houses, behind which the rice fields are situated. Bukor, the biggest Baga Sitem village³, is round. It is surrounded by rice fields and at its centre is a sacred bush, which it is forbidden to enter. Katako is on the mainland, and has never been an island (its easy accessibility explains why it was the first Mission centre).

Today Baga houses are all built with the same rectangular shape. There is evidence that Baga houses were once elliptical, but these houses no longer exist. When asked why, the Baga simply say that rectangular houses are easier to build. Despite their simple explanations, I believe that changes in houses' shapes correspond to many more factors. Old houses were not only elliptical, but were also made of wattle and daub instead of bricks and they had a long thatch that covered the whole house virtually reaching the

certainly at the village level) the tidal creeks are known as *bras de mer* and the word *marigot* is used to describe small freshwater rivers.

² It is significant to note that while old informants maintain that *amanco ngqpon* lives in the Fouta Djallon, younger informants tried to correct this view by insisting that *amanco ngqpon*'s home is not the Fouta but the sea, i.e. the mangrove.

³ In fact, Bukor is not the biggest Baga Sitem village (both Katako and Mare are bigger from all possible points of view), but it is the Baga Sitem village composed of more pure Baga *cibanka* (wards), while both Katako and Mare harbour many strangers' *cibanka*.

ground. Behind the change in houses' shape there may be a need to move away from the round *diglina* of the Fulbe, but there has also been a pressure from the Catholic missionaries, who for unclear reasons considered the first houses as "primitive" and the rectangular short-thatched ones as "civilized."

In front of the house there is a courtyard (*abanka*; pl. *cibanka*) and at the back of it a backyard (*daring*) harbouring the kitchen, to which, a bit further away, is added the enclosure where people take their baths (*kanda*, pl. *canda*; from the Susu *khande*) and the toilet cabin. In this part of the house they plant fruit trees: banana trees, papaw, palm, orange, citrons and mango trees. We could say that the back of the house is feminine (at least in the activities it entails) and the front one masculine. Or that the front part is social and the back private. A male stranger may go there if he wants to greet the women in the kitchen, but in principle he will be received and given food in the front, in the *abanka*. A female stranger, on the other hand, will rather quickly be absorbed by the group of women in the *daring*. In some villages, the back of the house directly leads to the rice fields, in other ones it smoothly merges into the bush and is seen as a potentially dangerous, or at least ambiguous, place. (I recall at my house in Mare the children did not dare to go to the *daring* in the night because they were afraid of witches.) Some male activities, especially those dealing with transformation of materials (iron smithing, carving, etc.) are carried out in the *daring* of houses.⁴

Each Baga village is divided into different wards called *abanka* (pl. *cibanka*), normally translated into French as either *secteur* or, more rarely, *quartier*. Ideally, all Baga villages contain three *cibanka*. Most villages today in fact contain more than three, but in these cases it is noteworthy that informants insist on there being three original "Baga" *cibanka*, the rest being attached *cibanka* made up of either strangers or of

⁴Although Baga people have since long time ago needed iron for the preparation of their *kop* (pl. *cop*), the spade they use to farm rice (see Figures 1 and 2), Baga smiths have been rather conspicuous by their absence, and the job is normally left to "strangers." Yet in recent years I have observed a rising interest in smithing by the Baga themselves, and I have met a few Baga people who are taking up the job. This new vocation is probably linked to the rise of house building as a cash activity among the Baga, but I cannot marshal ethnographic evidence to support it.

resettled individuals from one of the three main *cibanka*. When I was living in Mare, our *abanka*, on the edge of the village, was called *Dukulum* ("the bush"), but everybody referred to us as *Kareka* people, *Kareka* being one of the three central *cibanka* of Mare. The reason was that people living in *Dukulum* were in fact inhabitants of *Kareka* (belonging to the lineage *Dicola*, to be precise) who in the late 1940s had moved out from the centre of Mare to *Dukulum* for two reasons: One, because *Kareka* was physically becoming too small to harbour all its inhabitants; and two, because the Jakhanke strangers had just been given some land by *Kareka* elders outside the village, and some recently married young *Kareka* men were chosen by their elders and asked to move to *Dukulum* so that they kept an eye over these strangers. Today Mare contains eight *cibanka*, but whenever I asked anyone from any other village: "How many *cibanka* are there in Mare?", the answer was always the same: "three" (*Kareka*, *Kambota*, and *Katengne*). The same applies to other villages. Three seems to be the ideal number of *cibanka*.

Note that the word for ward, *abanka*, is the same one as that for the courtyard of each individual house. I shall return to this polysemy shortly. Each *abanka* is divided into several (again, three seems to be the ideal number) exogamous, patrilineal descent groups that correspond to the classical definition of "lineage" in that in all of them individuals know the chain of male elders (dead or alive) between them and the apical founder ancestor, normally four to six generations removed from the speaker. They also correspond to the category of "lineage" in that they are strongly corporate and property holding, and in that all their members tend to be seen as one single person (and at the same time, as I show below, as one single "house"). The apical founding ancestor reportedly came from elsewhere (generally, although by no means always, from the Fouta Djallon highlands), but his origins and life appear not to be as important as his death. Indeed, what defines a group as a lineage is the fact that the founding ancestor died in the *abanka* that for one reason or another he chose to live in, and that he is buried in the *kilo kipon* (pl. *wolo wopon*) of the lineage. The *kilo kipon*, literally meaning the "big house," is the house where the apical ancestor lived, and where members of the lineage meet on special occasions. "Big" is here a metaphor; in fact, the

kilo kipon is more often than not a rather small house, and Baga people are very reluctant to point out to strangers which are the *wolo wopon* of the village. Baga Sitem refer to lineages either as *kor* (pl. *cor*), *kusunka* (pl. *cusunka*), or *kilo disre* (pl. *wolo disre*). Let's analyse the polysemic meanings of each one of these concepts.

Kor, other than "lineage," also means "belly" (this combination of meanings is not rare in Africa). It has been suggested that this indicates Baga lineages were once matrilineal, the word *kor* testifying to the fact that their members come all from the same belly, i.e. the same mother (Bangoura 1974). While I accept that the reference to the belly may be intended, among other things, to emphasise the unity of descent of the members of the lineage, I am more reluctant to accept it as evidence of any historical transformation from matri- to patrilineal descent, although it has to be said that the neighbouring Landuma, who speak a mutually intelligible language with Baga Sitem and share many of their customs and migration narratives, are often described as matrilineal (although my view, from the scant data I could gather, is rather that their kinship system consists of a double descent). Matrilineality aside, I would like to point out that "belly," other than expressing unity in descent, also indicates unity in consumption, and consumption seems to be an essential trait of the human person, as much as descent is⁵. A lineage may be seen as a belly because it is made up of people who eat together, and certainly its members do eat together in sacrifices and other ceremonies. In any case, the word *kor* stresses the substantial unity of lineage members (one lineage, one belly, i.e. one person).

The consumption unit that lineages constitute has also its counterpart in the sinister world of witchcraft (*deser*), which is conceived of as a reversal of the human realm. Thus, lineages are not only units of consuming partners, but also of potentially consumed individuals. In other words, the members of a *kor* "eat together" (in the real

⁵The matrilineal connotations of *kor* contrast with the strict patrilineality of Baga lineages. Similarly, Robert Leopold reports that among the patrilineal Loma of Liberia (or Toma, as they are known in Guinea), when a woman is about to give birth, the members of the patrilineage of the father of the child approach the lineage of the woman and perform a ceremony that literally translates as "to take the belly," meant to appropriate the child into the father's lineage (Leopold 1991:96).

life) but they are also “eaten together” (in the feasts that witches celebrate in *dabal*, an invisible reality where witches move, kill and eat). When a member of a lineage dies, the others become extremely apprehensive, because one death may be just the start of a *kifen*, a “sweeping,” that is the systematic death of various members of a lineage. But the relationship between lineage and witchcraft is not only that members of a lineage are eaten together, but also that they are eaten by, and only by, the witches (*aser*, sing. *wiser*) of that lineage. The Baga insist that no one has to fear about the *aser* of other lineages, it is only your own lineage (the one you and your life fully “belong to”) that can eat you. This illustrates the ambiguity of the Baga lineage. On the one hand it offers protection and “personality” to individuals (an individual outside a lineage is inconceivable, even strangers have to be adopted by a lineage)⁶, but on the other hand it may as well annihilate them (“eat” them) if their individual actions are not intended to benefit the whole lineage. As far as the Baga are concerned, selfish action is social evil *par excellence*, and it must be punished⁷.

The second concept we have for lineage is *kusunka*. Other than “lineage,” *kusunka* also means “entrance” or “doorway.” This polysemy has to be analysed in conjunction with that of *abanka* (both “ward” and “courtyard”). We can say that the relationship between an entrance and a courtyard is similar to that of a lineage and a ward. As already discussed, the *abanka* is the social space of the house. In some wards, indeed (especially so in the older ones), the houses are so close to each other that it is difficult to see where one courtyard ends and the next one begins. In these wards the different courtyards merge into a big, communitarian one, a common social space where men

⁶In fact, it is difficult to say whether a stranger is really adopted by a lineage, or only superficially. For the Baga, consanguinity and birth define the essence of the person. A stranger may be adopted by a lineage, but his rights will be limited, and witches of the lineage will not be able to “eat” the stranger because, strictly speaking, he is not one of them. In that aspect, Baga lineages respond to the criterion of unilineal descent groups put forth by Leach when he stated that membership of unilineal descent groups can only be acquired by birth (Leach 1962).

⁷When I bought a bicycle (*kure*; pl. *cure*) and took it to Mare, where I was living with the lineage *Dicola*, my bicycle became ipso facto referred to by the villagers as *kure ka Dicola*, the bicycle of the *Dicola*. I was wisely advised not to say no to whichever *Dicola* wanted to use it. This increased my understanding of Baga ethics, although it considerably shortened the life of my (*sic.*) poor bicycl

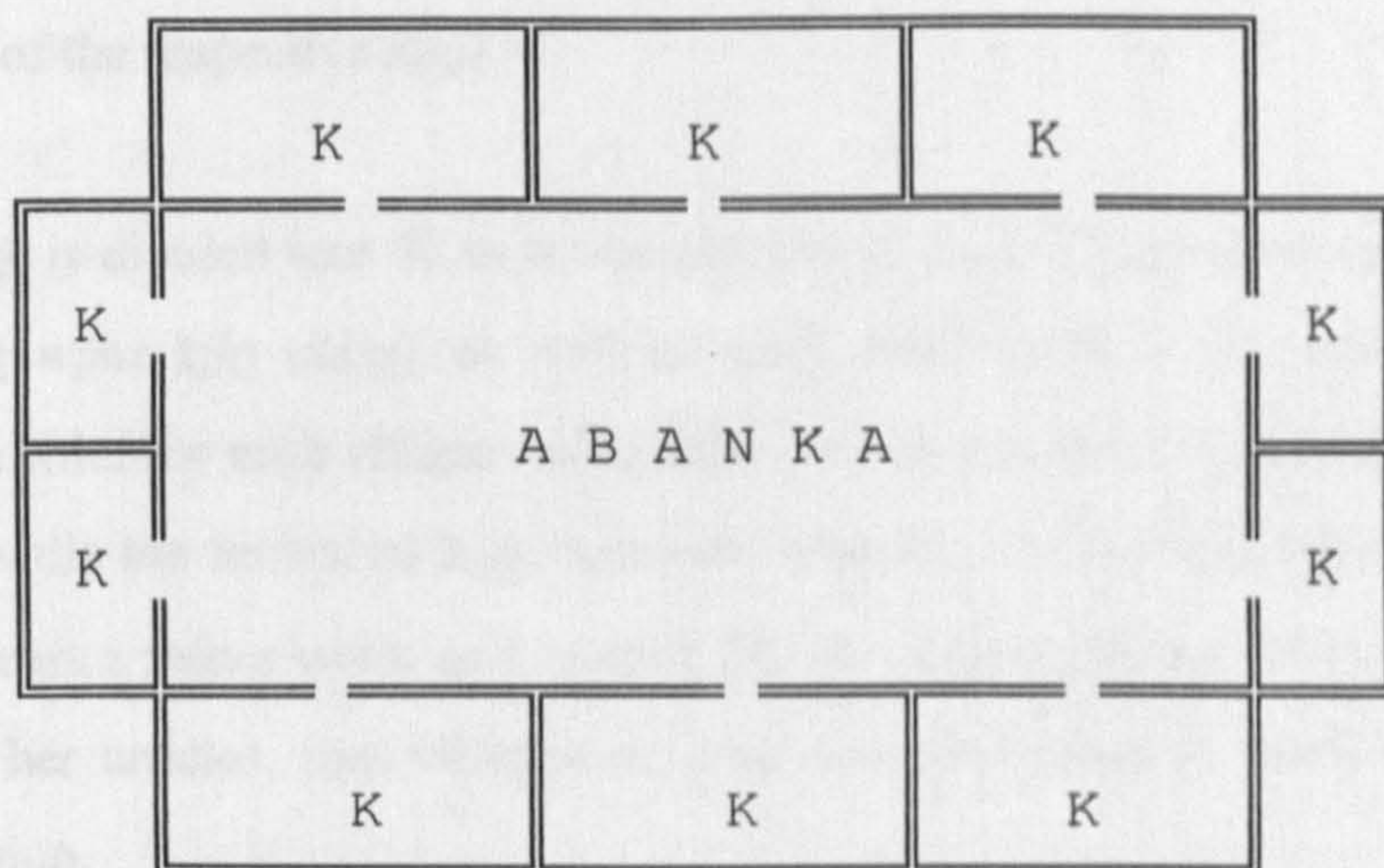
discuss their social lives. The concept of *abanka*, with its double signification of “courtyard” and “ward,” brings together the discrete houses and persons that make up the ward. When they go out of their house, they are not only in their private *abanka* (courtyard), but also in the common *abanka* (ward).

The third concept for lineage is *kilo disre*. *Kilo disre* literally means “inside the house” and it is also glossed as “the whole house” (*disre* being a post-positional suffix difficult to translate into European languages). Sometimes they only say *kilo* (house) when referring to the lineage⁸. They would say, for instance, that in *Kareka* (one of the *cibanka* of Mare) there are three *kilo*, meaning three lineages. We can say that for the Baga, the ward (*abanka*) is like a big courtyard (*abanka*) from which different entrances (*kusunka*) lead to different houses (*kilo*).

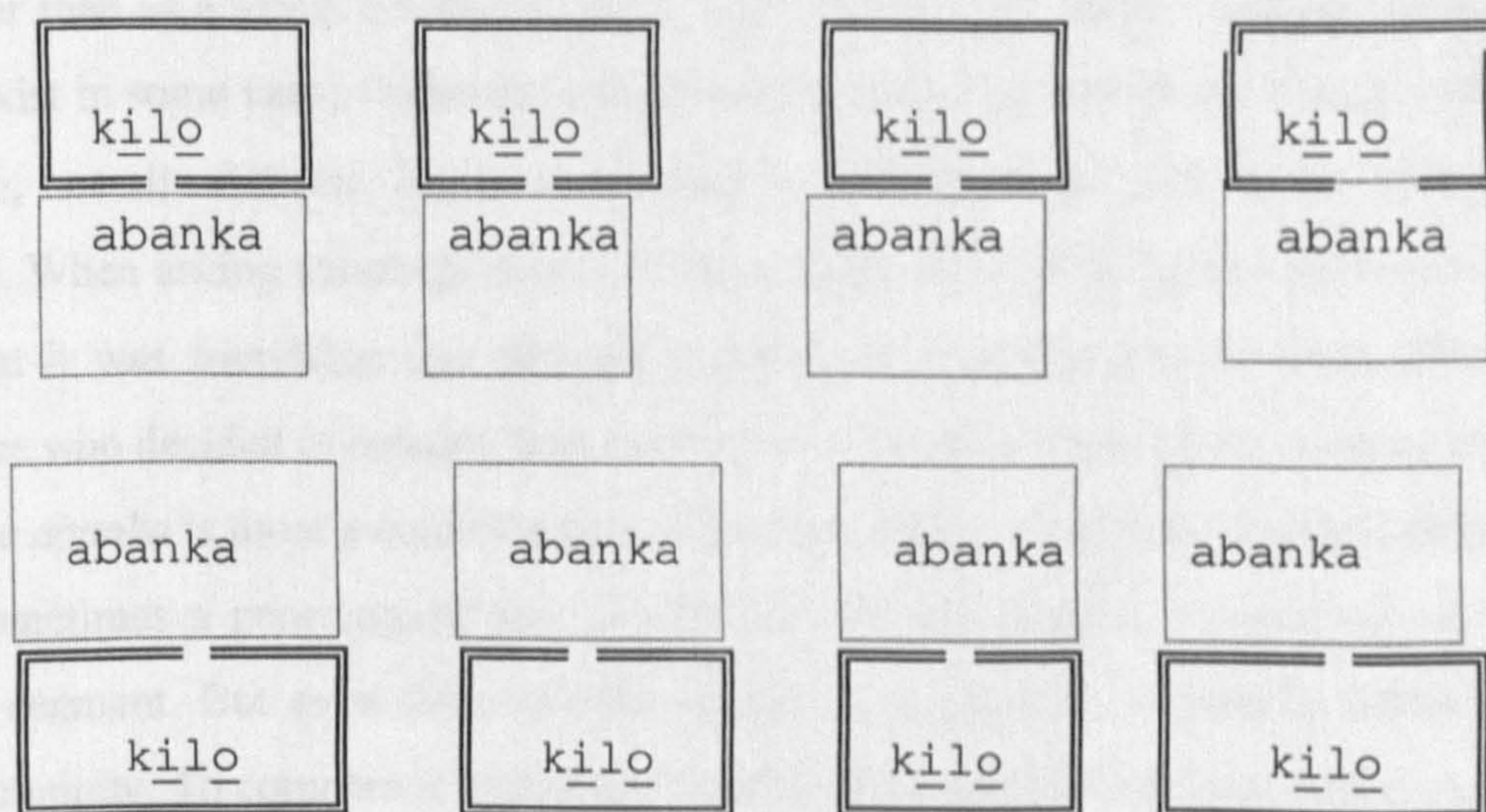
Note that this logic stresses territoriality rather than genealogy. This was to be expected, given that Baga people have always been very receptive to strangers and the process of ethnic and territorial incorporation is an important aspect of their cultural history. One is sometimes amazed to learn that the father or, more regularly, the mother of a member of a lineage was in fact a Jakhanke or Susu adopted quite recently.

The ideal scheme of the relationship between *abanka* (“courtyard” and “ward”) and *kilo* (“house” and “lineage”) is therefore the following:

⁸This could support Michael Jackson's views, as he is reported to have found that the house is a common metaphor to refer to unilineal descent groups in West Africa (Leopold 1991:117n).



That is to say, several discrete units (lineages or “k” for *kor*, *kusunka* or *kilo disre*) and one single social space, the *abanka*. In reality, though, houses are never so contiguous, and of course there is not a single house per lineage (although there is only one single *kilo kipun*, the ritual house already discussed, per lineage). The real map we would find in a Baga ward would look like this one:



Where *kilo* is house and *abanka* courtyard (boundaries of particular courtyards are not physically marked, although they are easy to perceive as all *cibanka* are swept daily by the women of the respective *kilo*).

Each lineage is divided into 50 or 60 houses (*kilo*). Each lineage has a publicly elected chief (*wibe wika kilo disre*) as well as each ward (*wibe wika abanka*). There is obviously a chief for each village (*wibe wika dare disre*), but it is interesting to keep in mind that while the territorial logic links the lineages, the houses and the *cibanka*, the village appears a rather weak unit, maybe due to the fact, already discussed by Denise Paulme in her articles, that villages as such are administrative units of rather more recent creation.

Genealogically speaking, the relationships between an *abanka* and its composite lineages are multiform. While the available literature seems to imply that *abanka* is always a major genealogical category (in which case I would not hesitate to translate it as either “maximal lineage” or “clan”), my field research proved to me that in fact the genealogical dimension of *abanka*, even when it exists, is minimal if compared to its territorial dimension: *abanka* is more often seen as the place where lineages live together than as a group of individuals of common descent. Such “common descent” does exist in some cases (although sometimes only among some of the lineages of the *abanka*, not all of them), but it was denied by informants in most of the *cibanka* I visited. When asking about the origin of the *abanka*, most of the time informants told me that it was friendship that brought together three or four people from different lineages who decided to cohabit, thus creating an *abanka*. In these cases, it seems to me that the *abanka* is more a confederation of lineages than a major genealogical category. But sometimes a genealogical link is admitted and the *abanka* is conceived of as a major segment. But even then, *abanka* is seen as a category of locality rather than consanguinity. To compare it with a well-known ethnographic case, one could say that the Baga *abanka* is similar to the Nuer *cieng*, the local community where lineages are incorporated (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Before illustrating that with a few examples, I want to insist that the stress on locality rather than consanguinity does not mean that the

abanka is less important than the lineage. In fact, the most striking thing about the *abanka* is that despite the importance of birth and blood links in concepts of personhood, the Baga seem to think of *abanka* before thinking of lineages. For instance, when inquiring (at the theoretical level) about how visiting strangers in any given village are treated, I was told that they are always asked what village, *abanka* and lineage they come from. But in reality my experience proved to me that strangers are normally only asked what village and what *abanka* they come from, and only rarely what their exact lineage is, which at first seems rather irrelevant: the *abanka* suffices to identify an individual. Similarly, when a young man from one *abanka* is betrothed to a woman of another one, all the young men of his *abanka* (and not only of his lineage) will help him work in the rice field of the boy's father-in-law as marriage payments. In other words, although they are not agnates, the inhabitants of each *abanka* tend to behave as though they were so.

Let us see now a few examples of the relationship between *abanka* and its composite lineages. I first took these examples from Théodore Camara (Camara 1966), but I double-checked them in the field and slightly amended them and enriched them with field data collected in each of the *cibanka* involved.

In the village of Bukor, the link between the lineages *Mankta*, *Cikle* and *Cincirta*, making up the *abanka* known as *Motia*, is explained as follows. A man called Motia had three sons and a daughter. His daughter was given in marriage to the lineage of *Dikawę* (in the *abanka* of *Morcok*), while the three sons (named Mankta, Cikle and Cincirta) remained with their father and eventually created the three "houses" (lineages) which bear their respective names. From a strictly genealogical point of view, in this case the *abanka* can be seen as a maximal lineage with the man named Motia as its apical ancestor, and the three lineages named after his sons (Mankta, Cikle, Cincirta) as sublineages. But whether they are lineages or sublineages does not really matter in the political structure of the village of Bukor, what matters is that they make up a territorial unit (*abanka*).

Incidentally, as opposed to other West African societies based on descent groups, the fact that a lineage or an *abanka* bears the name of its apical ancestor is not a general rule. Many lineage names appear to be locational (*Dicola*: “under the kola trees,” *Dikawę*: “under the silk-cotton tree”, etc.), many others are obscure to me and even to Baga speakers.

In the same village of Bukor the lineages *Dikawę* (“under the silk-cotton tree”), *Dingonc* (“under the *ngonc*,” another tree) and *Kaknę* (lit. “to plead”) make up the *abanka* of *Morcok*, but while a clear genealogical link is admitted between *Dikawę* and *Dingonc* (both with the patronymic Camara), there is no genealogical link between them and *Kaknę* people (called Keita), who are their strangers (hence possibly the name of their lineage). The founding story would be that the two brothers (Camara) founded an *abanka* in which, later, a certain Keita joined. The incorporation of the Keita people in different Baga villages is a most interesting phenomenon to which we shall return.

Still in the same village, the *abanka Mambre* is made up by the lineages *Mocok* (family name Bangoura) and *Kibarton* (family name Soumah). *Mocok* was founded by a man called *Mocok*, while the apical ancestor of the lineage *Kibarton* was a certain *Bosim*. No genealogical link is admitted between *Bosim* and *Mocok*, except that they both came together from Timbi, a village in the Fouta Djallon highlands. The two lineages together share the responsibility for *tomalę*, a cult related to rice farming. It is up to them, then, to ritually open both the sowing and the harvesting periods.⁹

Still in the same village, the *abanka Sonta* is composed of a single lineage, *Sonta*, founded by a Sonta Soumah. That there are *cibanka* with one single lineage (it happens in many a village) illustrates that *cibanka* and lineages belong to different realms, territorial the *abanka*, genealogical the lineage.

⁹Each lineage is responsible for a particular spirit related to one aspect of the common social life. This makes it difficult to determine “who” has the power in a Baga village. I shall discuss that in another section of this chapter.

There is another local category which is more comprehensive than *abanka* but less comprehensive than village (*dare*). To my knowledge there is no name for it, and it only exists in big villages with many “original” *cibanka*, such as Bukor. In Bukor, the *abanka* of *Kapinta* and that of *Motia* form a group called *Padeya*, while the *abanka* of *Morcok* and that of *Sonta* make up a group called *Mangueya* (which in Susu means the “ward of the chiefs,” because in colonial times the canton chiefs of the *Canton Monchon*, to which Bukor belonged, were chosen from one of the lineages of this group), the *abanka* of *Mambre* and that of *Tabol* form the group simply called *Mambre-Tabol*. These groups of *cibanka* would collaborate in ritual activities and in the composition of work parties. Each of these three groups is the owner of a *nimba* (or *dimba* in Baga Sitem), the huge female headdress that the Baga dance with on different social occasions (Fig. 7). In other villages, the *nimba* headdresses are owned by the *abanka* (and typically each Baga village should have three *nimba* headdresses).

3.3. Idioms of duality

We have seen that Baga *cibanka* are divided into patrilineal descent groups. This has led many authors to treat Baga as a “patrilineal society.” Yet, this does not mean that Baga only consider patrilineal relatives as kindred. The Baga Sitem word for kinship is *dokom* (or with the reflexive verbal extension *ne*: *dokomene*, which would translate as “kinship link”¹⁰), and it is divided in *dokom darkun* (men's *dokom*, that is, patrilineal relatives) and *dokom daran* (women's *dokom* or matrilineal relatives). *Dokom* (from the verb *kikom*, “to give birth”) in itself embraces both sides, and in many respects the matrilineal cognates are more important than the patrilineal agnates are. While the patrilineal relatives of ego are all in his/her own lineage, it is through the matrilineal ones that an individual is related to virtually all other lineages of his/her village and indeed other Baga villages (as not only the lineage of his/her mother counts, but also the lineage of the grandmother, and that of the great-grandmother and so on). Two

¹⁰In some villages, such as Bukor, *dokomene* also means “brideservice.” In most Baga Sitem dialects, however, the word for brideservice is *dembita*, from the Susu *mbita*, meaning “in-laws” (older than ego).

persons may consider themselves as *akomene* (sing. *wukomene*, relative) because their respective maternal grandmothers were from the same lineage. Sometimes the exact relationship between ego and a particular lineage is forgotten, but he or she knows that there is a *dokom daran* between them.

Kinship links among *cibanka* or villages are nevertheless not only expressed in terms of *dokom daran*, but also in avuncular metaphors. Any lineage, and by extension any *abanka*, is to any other one, either “mother’s brothers” (*anco*, sing. *ncoko*) or “sister’s sons” (*arok*, sing. *wirok*), an avuncular link that is accompanied by joking and affective attitudes. As with many other ethnic groups of the Upper Guinea coast, the mother’s brother and sister’s son relationship is an idiom that deserves special attention. For the Baga, the uterine nephew (*wirok*) is the physical link between two different lineages, the embodiment of their alliance. As one Baga man once told me: “Our *wirok* belongs to his lineage by his head, but to ours by his feet,” a metaphor that indeed expresses the embodiment of this link between lineages (although it can also express the dispute between two lineages over the nephew, or over the inheritance that sister’s sons are allowed to snatch). Sister’s sons prove to be essential in the settlement of disputes between lineages. At the same time, the mother’s brother (*ncoko*) is a very important figure for any Baga individual, at least as important as the father and the mother are. Baga mother’s brothers (MB) care very much about their nephews and feel obliged to help them whenever possible. Ideally, uncles confer rights to snatch whatever the nephews want from their houses, although I never witnessed any such thefts. The snatching is particularly obvious and ritualised in funerals and other ceremonies, where the sister’s sons (ZS) snatch things (or meat) theoretically belonging to their mother’s lineage. The Baga realize that this makes up for the fact that women do not inherit. “Nephews are thieves, but we need them,” pointed out a Baga man, insisting upon the importance of nephews as communicators between lineages, *cibanka*, villages, and so on.

MB and ZS relationship is a pervasive idiom that embraces a much wider range of phenomena than the mere relationship between an individual and the male members of

his/her mother's lineage, and that has to be seen in conjunction with the fact that uncles are seen as potential (even preferential) wife-givers. When a Baga man (and here I have to regret that most of my analysis comes from statements told to me by men) says that the people of such and such lineage, *abanka*, or village are his “uncles,” he is saying much more than merely expressing a kinship link. It is not only that his mother is consanguineously related to that people, but that those are the people who give wives to his lineage, and that eventually may give a wife to him. In other words, he is expressing a situation of inferiority towards that particular people. The idiom of uncles/nephews does in fact articulate the whole society and is very important to understand certain issues in the cultural history of the Baga. When discussing the history of colonial chieftaincies (see Chapter Four), M. Bangoura told me: “We Baga people were not interested in the chieftaincy. We had our sacred forests to discuss our issues, that's why we let the chieftaincy to the nephews.” He was using the uncle/nephew idiom to explain that the Baga who became interested in the public powers (whether canton or village chieftaincy) were late arrivals, people with little voice in the meetings of the Sacred Forest. At the same time, his statement also illustrates the importance of nephews as communicators. The “pure” lofty Baga (notions of “purity” are analyzed later on in this chapter) did not want to communicate directly with the French authorities, but only through the medium of the “nephews,” who would be thus situated in between the French and the sacred forest (with their head among the French and their feet in the forest, to use the Baga metaphor).

According to Denise Paulme and André Schaeffner, the first authors to pay attention to these issues among the Baga, Baga dualism had to do with settlement patterns, with exogamy rules, with division of labour, and with public and ritual roles.

Paulme argued that in a “typical” Baga Fore village, all inhabitants were either Bangoura or Camara. In her fieldwork, Paulme found that these two lines worked practically as moieties. The Bangoura tended to occupy the western wards. The Camara occupied the eastern ones and traced their genealogy directly from the Fouta Djallon. Paulme argued that the Bangoura lineages were specialized in fishing, whereas the

Camara tended to specialize in rice farming. Camara elders explained their origin by saying that many years before, three brothers came from Timbo. They founded different sites in the Baga land, which they claimed to have encountered empty. Through these ancestors, all Camara were inter-related. The Bangoura (still according to the Camara version) would have come later to the region. However, Bangoura families did not agree with that tradition, and stated to Paulme that *they* were the first inhabitants of the region, a claim supported by the fact that they occupy the western, coastal wards of the villages.

Denise Paulme argued that marriage within the moiety was very rare and that most Camara would marry Bangoura partners. In fact, she found that the Camara and the Bangoura people were mixed up (in terms of wards), and the “real” opposition between Camara and Bangoura people was always projected into the past.

To the eyes of its inhabitants, Monchon is no longer rigorously bipartite; they insist upon the fact that even if they are today all mixed up, the Bangoura and the Camara were not so in the past; memories and the projection into the past of a state that probably has not existed other than in their minds are stronger than reality (Paulme 1956:105; my translation).

Whether real or mental, the dualism was reinforced in a ritual performance that used to take place at the end of the initiation period, when the boys that had been secluded in the sacred bush for six months returned to the village: “At least once in his or her life, all the inhabitants of Monchon participate in a dramatic play which leaves in his/her memory the image of this duality” (Paulme 1956:106; my translation). This “dramatic play” was a fight between two massive headdresses representing snakes (well represented in African art collections, normally referred to by their Susu name *bansonyi*); one of them represented *mosolo kombo*, the “man,” protector of the Camara; the other was *mosolo sangada*, the “woman,” protector of the Bangoura¹¹. In this fight,

¹¹As Lamp has already noticed, the reported word “*mosolo*” was a misunderstanding of the Baga Fore word *macol*, from where, according to some of my informants, the very name of the village Monchon could come. The root *col*, (cf. *acol/col*, “medicine” in Baga Sitem) has a very broad application in all Baga, Nalu, and Landuma languages and dialects.

each spirit strove to steal each other's children, "to assert its superiority by attracting towards itself the circumcised boys protected by its rival, who is also its consort" (Paulme 1956:106; my translation). For Schaeffner, this ritual, which he compared to other West African masquerades, illustrates the complementarity of the feminine and the masculine principles of both society and nature (Schaeffner 1962).

Nowhere did Paulme and Schaeffner find a more complicated dualism than in the village of Katako. According to Paulme, all the inhabitants of Katako, either Camara or Bangoura (any *abanka* in Katako contained both), were divided into *wusuto* (pl. *asuto*) and *kulokinkaykosi*. Paulme and Schaeffner saw a relationship between this dualism and the first vs. late arrivals model. They also realized that there was a relationship between it and alliance strategies. They observed that while the *asuto* are the descendants of the first arrivals (the founders of Katako), the *kulokinkaykosi* are descendants of latecomers, and said to be the sons-in-law of the first comers. As the Baga observe the mother's brother's daughter as a preferential category for men to marry, the fact that the descendants of latecomers were considered as sons-in-laws of first arrivals can be considered as equivalent of being considered as "nephews" (*arok*). Denise Paulme argued that *asuto* men have a ritual power over the *kulokinkaykosi*, since in the sowing and harvesting rituals it is the *wusuto* who perform the symbolic rituals that open the work period, while it is the "sons-in-law" who do most of the actual work.

Paulme and Schaeffner took care to notice the relationship (among the Baga Sitem of Katako) between this dualism and some initiation rituals they either attended or heard about, namely the *abol* masquerade (which they attended in Katako) and the boys' initiation into manhood (which happened a year later in Katongoro). Among the Sitem this manhood initiation is presided over by *amanco ngopon*, considered to be the "husband" of the feminine *abol*. The two respective masquerades implied a double transvestism. In the ceremonies of *abol*, the boys in the village would dress like women and would play the sistrum or *wasamba* (a typically feminine instrument made out of calabash bits, widely used in West Africa), they would beat typically feminine drums,

and they would seize the village, starting with the canton chief's house¹². In the ritual of *amanco ngopon* in Katongoro a year later, the boys were secluded in the *afan* (sacred bush) while the women in the village played masculine instruments and drums and danced in men's public places. Unfortunately, although Schaeffner tried to connect these two masquerades, I think that the fact that they happened in the two villages of Katako and Katongoro, very close to each other, and only within a year was sheer coincidence, since Katako and Katongoro belong to different provinces and have never shared any boys initiation. (Katako used to celebrate its *amanco ngopon* initiation ceremonies together with Kakilenc and Mare, whilst Katongoro would do it together with Kawass and Tolkoc.) Yet Schaeffner and Paulme were correct, I think, in that *abol* and *amanco ngopon* have to be thought of together, as two complementary aspects of the same unit.

We do not know the origins of these two masquerades. *Abol* is certainly old. That the Baga had a spirit called *abol* had been reported in the 17th century by Portuguese missionaries such as Manuel Alvares (Alvares [c. 1615] 1990b:3) and André de Faro (Faro [1663-64] 1982:68-69). *Amanco ngopon* could even be older. Nowadays, as I have said, *amanco ngopon* and *abol* are considered to be husband and wife, and referred to, respectively, as the old man (*witem*) and the old woman (*witemra*). *Amanco ngopon* is also commonly referred to as *aparan* (grand-dad). Frederick Lamp, who conducted intensive fieldwork in Tolkoc, has convincingly demonstrated that *abol* was introduced by the lineage *Katom* (family name: Keita). Myth has it that a woman from that lineage “discovered” *abol* on a beach of Tolkoc¹³. To this useful information offered by Lamp we can add my own findings that a) the *Katom* are indeed responsible for *abol* in different villages (*Katom* is a maximal lineage with sublineages in different

¹²Schaeffner recalls that when the boys came out of the sacred forest dressed like women in order to seize the village, carrying with them the enormous *abol*, a turtle-shaped construct some twelve metres long, even the canton chief had to hide inside his house. To me, this reveals, as we saw earlier in the chapter, that the Baga chose their public chiefs among low status lineages (“nephews” as they told me).

¹³“What” exactly *abol* was is not clear. According to Schaeffner, it was a turtle-shaped construct some twelve metres long. Some informants told me it represented a house (an oval

Sitem villages) and b) that the *Katom* people, as I will discuss later, seem to be descendants of strangers (probably runaway slaves of the Fouta, if not slaves of the Baga) who were incorporated among the Baga from the village of Tolkoc (according to my informants. Lamp seems to have gathered an origin other than Tolkoc).¹⁴

We will see more about the *Katom* later in this chapter, but here I want to stress two facts: first, that *Katom* is one of the rare cases of maximal lineages with representatives in many different villages. This ubiquity of the *Katom* would be linked, it seems to me, to their responsibility for *abol*, a feminine spirit-cult which at some point, and for very obscure reasons, would have become essential to the whole *Bagatai*. In Mare on some occasions every initiated man would be referred to as either a “man” or a “woman” and they would joke about it when drinking in the *kiwal*. Whether a man was considered a “man” or a “woman” depended upon which of the two sacred bushes (today non-existent) he had been secluded in his initiation ceremony, back in the late 1940s. One of the two bushes belonged to *abol* and the men initiated in it are at some obscure metaphorical level considered as “women,” (not that they feel vexed about it, since they know that they were initiated into manhood, not into womanhood). The other sacred bush in Mare belonged to *amanco ngopon* and their men would be referred to as “men” (when opposed to the other ones). In any case, whichever the bush was, the six-month seclusion always concluded with an *amanco ngopon* masquerade. The exact context and cycle of the *abol* masquerade is not clear to me and people were not very helpful, despite the fact that my own lineage (*Dicola*) was responsible for *abol* in Mare.

house). In any case its femininity and its being a counterpart of *amanco ngopon* are not contested by anybody.

¹⁴The village of Tolkoc seems to be always associated with strangeness. In an unpublished manuscript I was given to read in which a young Christian man had written down some stories told to him by one of his elders, the inhabitants of the village of Tolkoc were described as Toma people (The Toma are a Mande-speaking group living in *Guinée Forestière*). The text did not specify any lineage, but Tolkoc is the village where the different *Katom* lineages stem from, and even today it is the ritual centre of all *Katom* people. Incidentally, this kind of manuscripts where people write the history of their (or others') villages is more abundant than one first would think, but permission to consult them is not easy to obtain.

The second point I want to make is that all this may look contradictory. What we find here is, on the one hand, an ideal model which opposes first arrivals to late arrivals, the former being the masters of the earth, with ritual power and involvement in powerful cults, while the latter would be less powerful in ritual and would tend to become interested in politics, Islam and other forms of external power. On the other hand, however, we find that a late arriving lineage such as the *Katom* (one that is sometimes considered as being made up of "slaves") is the introducer of one of the two most important cults of the Baga, and one that articulates their whole society.

This illustrates how carefully cultural models have to be handled, whether they are ideal models built by anthropologists (such as the first arrivals vs. the latecomers) or local ones such as the "MB/ZS" or the "in-laws" idioms.

Thus to the supposed lack of ritual power of lower status lineages (slaves, sisters' sons, late arrivals) one has to oppose some contradictory findings. When inquiring about the pervasive idioms of affine relationships in Katako, Denise Paulme was significantly told that the "sons-in-law" were witch-doctors. Although she did not master the language, she took care to write down the Baga Sitem word she was given: "wulompsatchol" (*wilompis acol*; pl. *alompis acol*), which literally means "s/he who makes medicine." In fact, *wilompis acol* is more than a witch-doctor (any traditional doctor, very abundant among the Baga, is a *wilompis acol*), and it is interesting to note, given the vast amount of reported witchcraft attacks among the Baga, that sons-in-law (latecomers) were considered by Paulme's informants as makers of anti-witchcraft charms and therefore as potential intermediaries between people in conflict. In another article specifically on Baga witchcraft she mentioned that the secret masks of the village belonged to the "nephews," when one would probably expect them to belong to the "uncles."

A similar statement was told to me about the role of slaves (*acar*; sing. *wicar*) among the Baga. When inquiring about Baga indigenous slavery, I was once told that the Baga used the slaves to keep the secrets of the forest (while at the same time I was always

told that the slaves did not participate in the meetings of the sacred forest, which were exclusively for the “pure” Baga). This involvement of low status people in secret things’ maintenance should not disturb us too much. In fact, I am sure it is a common practice in societies such as the Baga, in which secrecy is so important, that sacred objects (but not the knowledge related to them) are kept by people who are not even aware of the importance of such objects. In this way they protect the real owners of the ritual power and disorientate potential pillagers of both objects and knowledge.

Frederick Lamp has recently taken up the issue of the Baga dualism. He has highlighted the importance of the *Katom* lineage(s) in introducing a feminine spirit (*abol*) that complements the masculine *amanco ngopon*, brought into the land by the first arriving lineages (according to Lamp’s findings). Lamp has proposed still another model to analyze this dualism, namely the elder brother/younger brother model. This model is to be found in a wide range of West African societies, especially, but not exclusively, among Mande-speaking groups (Lamp 1996a). According to this model, the idiom of older vs. younger brother, idealized in stories and in rituals, is a pervasive one that explains most of the characteristics of the society:

The elder (as in the elder brother) has inherent rights, but the younger is associated with initiative, is likely to assume those rights and is ultimately expected to take pre-eminence .(...) The Baga share a construction of “elder brother/younger brother” that is well-known in the Mande world (...): the younger is seen as the usurper, and also as lesser in rank. The clan of the *a-Bol* moiety are the “younger” of more recently arrived groups, and they are not fully initiated into the secrets of the male moiety of *a-Mantscho-ño-Pön*. (Lamp 1996:74; my italics).

The model again opposes the first comers (responsible for *amanco ngopon*) to later arrivals (*abol*), an opposition reinforced by the legend of the discovery of *abol* in Tolkoc, since this was discovered not by a first born but by second (or third) born girl named *Tshaparfi*¹⁵. Whether she is a second or a third-born becomes insignificant,

¹⁵ According to Lamp, the name *Tshaparfi* would indicate that the woman was a third-born daughter (Lamp 1996b:71). If true, this would illustrate again the importance of number three in legend and ritual. However, in my opinion, Lamp is wrong. The problem is *Tshaparfi* (or

because Lamp has prudently qualified the relevance of this kind of models in a theory of indigenous power:

By no means can we assume that lower status, or feminine status, means lesser power, any more than we can assume that the first-born, or the first to arrive, takes the rights of pre-eminence. (Lamp 1996:71).

I find the “younger brother” model insufficient to analyze Baga society because it minimises the importance of idioms of alliances and of MB/ZS relations, but I certainly agree with Lamp that “power” is a slippery concept, and that it is very difficult to measure.

3.4. The web of corresponding lineages

All the lineages of all villages are connected through a network of corresponding ties. For instance, the lineage *Dicola* in the village of Mare would have a corresponding lineage in any other Baga village, and not only among the Sitem¹⁶. When a *Dicola* goes to another village, he or she will be received by this corresponding lineage, who will provide shelter, food and help either in potential troubles or in negotiations with people from other lineages. They are also instrumental in arranging marriages between the visitor and members of other lineages of their village. Although a marriage between members of two corresponding lineages may occur, they are not very well regarded. Baga people prefer to behave with members of their corresponding lineage in the same way they behave with members of their own lineage at home. That does not mean that any single Baga person knows all his/her corresponding lineages in all the other Baga villages. Elders sometimes do,¹⁷ but youngsters who have not yet travelled much

similar names: *Cai*, *Capi*, *Cap*, etc.) is a customary name for a second-born girl, not a third-born one (whose name should be *Konu* or a derived one).

¹⁶But significantly, Baga Sitem old men who could name all their corresponding lineages among the Sitem could rarely remember what their corresponding lineages among the Baga Fore were.

¹⁷Having said that, it is interesting to note that most elders know in what *abanka* of other villages their corresponding lineage is incorporated, but do not remember the name of the exact

around the territory do not know who their corresponding lineages are. But it does not really matter, because as soon as they get to a Baga village that they have never visited, they are asked what village, what *abanka* and what lineage they come from and they are given directions accordingly.

Baga people cannot explain the origin of this bond among lineages, which ties up the whole Bagaland in a solid web and allows every individual to feel at home in any village. One cannot talk of corresponding lineages as making up huge, inter-village "clans" because the links among them do not always correspond. Thus, the link between "my" lineage (*Dicola*) in Mare and that of my field assistant Aboubacar (*Dingonc*) in Bukor was that they were corresponding. But the corresponding lineages of Aboubacar in other villages (say, Katako or Katongoro) were not necessarily the same ones I would have to regard as *my* corresponding lineages. When we visited these villages, we had to settle in different houses in order not to upset people, as rules of hospitality are to be closely respected. In any case, the relationship between two corresponding lineages is always reciprocal. If lineage A has as corresponding lineage lineage B, then the corresponding lineage of B is A.

A few key informants told me that the original link between two corresponding lineages had to be searched for in marriages that occurred long ago between the two lineages, while others told me it was women who had united them. An old man from Katongoro, who knew by heart all his corresponding lineages, could still name a few women from his lineage (two to three generations above him) that had tied his lineage with lineages in other villages (although most of the links were obscure to him). It could be that the bond between two corresponding lineages was the outcome of a *kisipe* or direct exchange of women. That would make people of a lineage be distant cognates of the people of the other one and vice versa, a kinship link that later would fall into oblivion.

lineage, which again proves, as I have said before, that Baga people think of *cibanka* before thinking of lineages.

Whatever the history behind it, the Baga regard this web of corresponding lineages as a sign of brotherhood and enjoy talking about it, and they often regret that it is increasingly breaking down because people do not travel around much anymore. But they are confident that the bonds can be reactivated, and several informants commented upon the creation of the three-week annual Baga football tournaments (see Chapter Six) as an opportunity (if not their main aim) to reactivate the links among villages and force young people to go and stay in another village for at least three weeks every year, something that in former times, when the Baga were much more dependant on masquerades and on spirit cults, would happen relatively often.

This web of corresponding lineages is in my opinion relevant to contemporary issues of ethnic boundaries. A recent thesis on the Baga (Bouju 1994 vol. I:325n) states that among the Baga (as opposed, for the author, to the Dogon) there is no link between ethnicity and alliances, or between ethnic and kinship boundaries. His view seems to be that any one who calls himself a Baga may marry a non-Baga individual and their offspring will be considered Baga or not depending on many factors other than kinship. I cannot agree with his opinions, which are only dependant on the fact that Bouju carried out most of his fieldwork in Conakry and its surrounding villages, where the Baga identity is today much blurred. Northern Baga groups (Sitem, Pokur, Baga Fore) insist that Baga marriages have to be endogamous because, they claim, people from other ethnic groups are useless as they do not know how to farm rice with the *kop* in the mangroves (see Figures 1 and 2). The fact that today the groups that are still considered "Baga" in Guinea and where one talks about the territory called the *Bagatai* are the Baga Sitem, the Baga Pokur and the Baga Fore (precisely the three groups being interrelated through this web of lineages and the three groups actively involved in the football tournament) should provide a hint of the importance of this web of lineages in the maintenance of a distinct Baga identity (and language). This identity becomes increasingly blurred and Susu-ized among the southern Baga (Baga Kakissa, Baga Koba, Baga Kalum).

3.5. Hierarchy, purity and the problem of Baga slavery

Slavery is more often than not strongly denied by informants in the field, and the available literature does not say much about it, sometimes clearly endorsing its denial.

In the previous chapter we have already discussed the character of the Baga territory as a land of asylum, already remarked upon by its early visitors such as the slave trader Th. Conneau, the French lieutenant A. Coffinières de Nordeck, or the colonial administrator A. Chevrier. In this section I want to add some additional material and analysis of Baga slavery on the basis of the scant information I could gather in the field.

It is true, and somewhat surprising, that the Baga were not involved in the active Atlantic slave trade that was occurring only a few kilometres away from their territory, and which did affect their Nalu, Landuma or Susu neighbours¹⁸. This said, even a superficial sociological survey will reveal that indigenous slavery is an important element (no matter how strongly denied) of the Baga social structure. That Baga did once buy slaves was acknowledged to me on several occasions by key informants from different villages (Katako, Mare, Bukor, Katongoro). Father Dominique Camara, from Mare, who is currently carrying out a thorough study of his society, does not have any qualms about it and even revealed to me the exact village where the Baga used to buy their slaves. To my question, "Do the Baga have slaves?" the late Nene Ali Bangoura from Katongoro (one of my boldest informants) simply answered "*acar gna la!*" (there are many slaves among us), and even acknowledged possessing a few for himself. He claimed to even remember the exact price of the slaves (3 or 4 francs) in the Landuma village of Nareya. Most slaves, nevertheless, were, according to this informant, captured in warfare, especially in the frequent wars against the Nalu, and also, but to a lesser degree, against the Landuma. "There are two kinds of Nalu people among us" he told me; "those who arrived in search of refuge, and those who were sold to us by their

¹⁸But this statement, as almost everything else said about the Baga, should also be qualified. In fact I suspect that the involvement of the Baga in intensive rice farming was one way or another linked to the increasing demands of rice by slave traders of the neighbouring ports of Boffa and Boké.

parents. The first are still recognisable, the second group have now become Baga." (It is true that there are lineages of Nalu origin in almost all Baga villages, as well as Nalu individuals in many other lineages.) According to him, the Baga needed slaves to work in the rice fields. But slavery (*dacar*), he insisted, was a forbidden issue to talk about in daily life. It was only in the (sacred) forest that it could be discussed, and that the slave origins of specific individuals or lineages would be revealed. According to him, one of the first rules regarding slavery was that it was strictly forbidden to deny women to slaves. (This accelerated the incorporation of slaves into Baga society, but also reinforced the superiority of wife-giving lineages over wife-receivers, especially since the latter would have to work and tap huge amounts of palm wine for their "fathers-in-law"). Socially, there was to be no difference between free men and slaves, but once in the sacred forest, there were places reserved to free men and places reserved to slaves. On one occasion, Nene Ali Bangoura recalled, he went to Katako with one of his slaves to attend the *kibere acol*, then a rather common cult. At one point in the ceremony, a man (reportedly one of the slave's friends) sang an allegorical song which enigmatically revealed the origin of his friend. When they returned to Katongoro, the vexed slave committed suicide. It is of course to avoid tragedies of this sort that slavery has become such a strong secret.

But tragedies do continue to occur. Only a few years ago a man in Mare refused to allow his daughter to get married to her boyfriend because, as he publicly announced, the latter was from a lineage of slaves. The man mysteriously died a few days later. The explanation went that *amanco ngopon* had liquidated him because he had revealed secret information learnt in the sacred forest (how would he otherwise know that his daughter's boyfriend was of slave origin?), and that he had publicly discussed in the *abanka* a delicate issue which he should have only spoken about in the sacred forest. However tragic, the case illustrates the importance of *amanco ngopon* in regulating what can and what cannot be said. Another informant told me that it was in the sacred forest that the hierarchy of lineages would be taught, but that once outside the forest, "*amanco ngopon* buried it (the issue)." The phrase "*amanco ngopon* has buried it" is often heard when there has been a problem but a reconciliation has later occurred. The

implication is that whoever dares to bring the issue back to social life (to “dig it up”) will be punished by *amanco ngopon*. Origins of lineages are typically “buried” by *amanco ngopon*. Yet, in public discussions, when someone from a low class lineage confronts someone from a higher status, the latter will tacitly warn him “*e, sin cer im*” (“beware, we know who you are”) and the former will calm down. Apart from that, Baga people are masters of allusive speech, and they know how to reveal things (sometimes to the desperation of the ethnographer) without necessarily speaking them out, by the uses of *capafō* or indirect speech.¹⁹ Thus, although they insist that the origins of lineages and the problems of slavery are only discussed in the sacred forest, the truth is that the issue is present in many social occasions.

“There are different categories of Baga,” E. Camara, from Katako, told me, “but only those who have been in the sacred forest know who is who”. S. Camara, from Bukor, made it clear that he was a “pure” Baga, a statement with a double, interrelated meaning (as elaborated by himself): that he was not a slave, and that he had followed the whole initiation cycle (slaves were only circumcised but not allowed to follow higher steps in the sacred bush education cycle). I was often told that the colour of the skin of a Baga can give some insights about the “purity” of the person: the more obscure the skin, the more Baga the person. This notion of purity is significantly opposed to that of the Fulbe people, who would say exactly the opposite (that is, light skin reveals purity, darkness impurity).

The question of slavery is a complicated one, probably more difficult because we do not know what the exact role of the slaves is (or was), nor for that matter, to come back to the point already made, what the exact role of strangers in general is. On the one hand, as we have seen, slaves are severely looked down on as “impure,” but on the other hand they seem to have been crucial in the introduction of very important spirit-cults. Whether slaves or just “nephews” (or “sons-in-law”), the Baga seem to believe

¹⁹ Baga Sitem *capafō* falls into the category of what Bellman has called “deep talk” in his book on secrecy in Liberia (Bellman 1984). Basically, it is an enigmatic way of saying something (through metaphors and parables) without really saying it.

that some lineages are inferior to others, but nonetheless equally necessary, not only in social services, but even in the introduction of spiritual elements.

We have already seen the importance of the *Katom* lineages in introducing rituals. The old Nene Ali Bangoura insisted *Katom* lineages are made up of descendants of strangers first incorporated into the Baga in the village of Tolkoc, but refused to clarify whether the first *Katom* strangers in Tolkoc were slaves of the Baga or rather refugees.

In 1934, Raymond Lerouge collected an interesting song in Katako:

Abunu ngan k̄inc k̄o ngam bulum acar.

Abunu a cerm-ferm; a yim cufon.

Cer̄enk c̄impet k̄o c̄impet Kasan.

(Lerouge 1935:11; I have altered Lerouge's orthography).

Which can be translated as:

The *Abunu* (people from Tolkoc) have circumcised their boys and they have mixed up slaves [with other boys]. The *Abunu* are hopeless, they have red hair. The elephants have trembled the earth and they have done so in Kassin.

The last phrase is a *capaf̄o*, a hidden speech, indeed too hidden for me to decipher. Kassin is a part of Tolkoc, precisely the same one, according to Coffinières de Nordeck, the Baga gave to the Nalu so that the latter could place their slaves (Coffinières de Nordeck 1886:292; see quotation in Chapter Two). The allusion to the "elephants" is enigmatic. Nevertheless the reference to initiating slaves (thus making them members of society) is clear and very telling. The song also illustrates that no matter how deep *amanco ngopon* has "buried" issues about slavery (or about other delicate problems for that matter) people do talk about them in songs.²⁰ Whether the song collected by Lerouge refers to the *Katom* people or not I do not know, but it is

²⁰The role of songs in ceremonies (such as in *nimba* performances) seems to be to say things in *capaf̄o* that would otherwise remain unsaid, because they would hurt feelings if directly addressed. See the tragic case of Nene Ali Bangoura's slave explained above.

interesting that inhabitants of Katako thought that the first Baga people to mix up slaves with non-slaves were those from Tolkoc.

When discussing the duality between *amanco ngopon* and *abol* (structurally similar to that of the two *mosolo* among the Baga Fore discussed by Denise Paulme), André Schaeffner wrote that "a ritual that is essential to a society must reveal something about both the history and the structure of that society" (Schaeffner 1952; my translation). Due to the scant data he and Denise Paulme could gather in their short visits, he could not apply this hypothesis to the Baga. Nor can I undertake the analysis of the rituals associated with these two cults, since they have long been given up, but I am positive that the analysis would support my point: That both the structure and the history of the Baga are shaped by a strong contradiction between the alleged superiority of firstcomers (whether we call them "uncles," "fathers-in-law," or "older brothers") and the need for, indeed the complementarity of, late-arrivals ("nephews," "sons-in-law," "younger brothers," and even "slaves"). These concepts, like so many other concepts used by the Baga, are relative and portray ideal situations.²¹ In fact, I doubt that there is a single lineage that can be claimed to be an absolute firstcomer. To the well-organized version of layers of arrivals presented by Lamp in his book, where it seems easy to determine who are the first arrivals and who the late ones, I could oppose with versions gathered in other villages, which present them in a different order.

I would like to finish this section by insisting once again that slavery is most strongly denied by most informants. The denial of indigenous slavery is linked to the denial of any involvement in the slave trade, and it is one of the most conspicuous elements of Baga cultural identity and discourses today. The Baga are defined as a group of people who were not slaves, had no slaves and had nothing whatsoever to do with slavery.

²¹The most relative concept I can think of is that of *wirkun* (pl. *arkun*), "man" (as opposed to *wiran*, "woman," whose meaning seems fully consensual). In principle, one would have thought that all men, at least all the adults, or all initiated adults at the very least, are *wirkun*. But no. There is always someone more *wirkun* than the speaker (and once I was told that today there are no *wirkun*, only in the past there were real "men,"). *Dorkun* (manhood) thus seems an ideal to approach through age, knowledge, and ultimately death. "*Wirkun*" is a common euphemistic metaphor to refer to *amanco ngopon*.

When inquiring about the content of initiation teachings I was sometimes told that these teachings boiled down to making the neophyte aware of what "Baga" means, and how to become one²². At some level "Baga" seems to mean the human person (*fum*, pl. *afum*). The impression is that only the fully initiated person is really a human being, a Baga, a *fum*. In daily speech, the words "*wibaka*" (pl. *abaka*) and "*fum*" (pl. *afum*) are interchangeable. On one occasion I heard someone asking: "Is there any *wibaka* there?" (meaning in the back of his house, from where he heard some noise), and another one answering: "No; nobody is there; just some Fulbe." The first question in Baga was: *Abaka nga yi di?* ("Is there any Baga/anybody there?"), and the answer given by his Baga fellow was: "*Ala; afum gna yi fe di; afula gna yi*" ("no, there is no person; there are Fulbe"). This not only illustrates the interchangeability of *abaka* (the Baga) and *afum* (the persons), but it also removes the Fulbe (*afula*) from the category of both *abaka* and *afum*! (The way Baga look down on the Fulbe is probably only matched by the way Fulbe look down on other ethnic groups.)

If slaves of the Baga were not fully initiated (apart from the common circumcision), could we say that the slaves are not really "Baga," not really human beings? Most probably that is what the Baga think. Being a Baga, both as a human individual and as a whole ethnic group, is being beyond slavery. In that respect the ideology of the Baga is not dissimilar to that of their enemies *par excellence*, the Fulbe, except that among the Baga the distinction between freemen and slaves is not easy to perceive and normally not acknowledged by the informants. Properly analyzed, however, the notion of the Baga as having nothing to do with slavery is not the expression of an "egalitarian" society, but an instrument that allows people within the community to oppose distinct classes of individuals, some more "Baga" than others.

²²Again, *wibaka* (Baga) seems an ideal, similar to that of *wirkun* (man) discussed in the footnote.

3.6. Political and ritual structures of power

Pre-colonial Baga society has been reported as an acephalous society lacking centralised power. The imposition by French colonialists of a central agency of power became very problematic, as we will see in the next chapter. Concurrent to their lack of central government prior to French arrival, the Baga are equally reported to be traditionally ruled by a “Council of Elders,” a notion that in my view is essentially true, but that needs some clarification all the same.

If one reads the literature on the Baga, one will find that they are normally described as a people with a double structure of power, somewhat related to the “dual organisation” that we have already commented upon in an earlier section. Thus, one normally reads that the first arrival lineage of a Baga village is the one responsible for *amanco ngopon*, the second lineage is responsible for *abol*. Or that the first is responsible for *amanco ngopon* and the second responsible for *tomalō*. Some authors have claimed that the structure of power is not bipartite but tripartite:

The founding family is responsible, other than for the land, for the divinity “amantcho” [*amanco ngopon*] (...). The second family to have settled in the village is responsible for the feminine counterpart of “amantcho”: “Abol.” The third family has a judicial responsibility in the village, intervening in conflicts, making sure that the decisions of the Council [of Elders] are applied, and organising the collective works. (Bouju, vol. 1:184; my translation and parenthesis).

Unfortunately, Bouju does not support this claim with any data. In fact, I found that the distribution of responsibilities among lineages was much more widely disturbed than that, and that the bipartition of power reported in the literature was the projection of a West African ideal type which opposes land owners to land borrowers, masters of the earth to latecomers, etc. As for the tripartite model presented by Bouju and others, I think more research should be done on the importance of three as the ideal number of lineages within an *abanka*, of *cibanka* within a village and of villages within a

province²³. This topic has not been fully explored, but even if three has been in the past the exact number of institutions involved in villages' organisation, such tripartition has now certainly broken down. What I could verify in my fieldwork was that each lineage in any village was responsible for a particular cult and that all of them were considered as equally necessary to the welfare of the village. And, most importantly, that there has never been a single lineage responsible for the highest cult *amanco ngopon*, but rather that this particular cult was shared by three lineages in each village (again three is a significant number). One of these lineages was in charge of *amanco ngopon*'s head (a sculpture representing, from what we know, a bird-like head), another one of its trunk (a massive construct of wood and raffia, reported to reach between ten and twenty metres high) and another one of its legs and feet. We know that *amanco ngopon* was represented by a very high construction that would appear in the village once every twelve years or so. According to Asekou Sayon, inside the massive construct of *amanco ngopon* there were several men, one on top of another, each one of them belonging to a different lineage of the village. I interpret this as an indication that all the lineages were considered equally necessary to the preparation of *amanco ngopon*'s masquerades, since *amanco ngopon* was responsible for boys' initiation into manhood, and initiation was common to all the members of the village or spirit province. When discussing the issue with some old Baga informants, they agreed with my interpretation, although they qualified it by insisting that the lineage responsible for the *amanco ngopon*'s head was the "most important" in the village. One member of this lineage would be on top of the human tower hidden beneath the raffia inside *amanco ngopon*'s body, and it would be he who would speak through *amanco ngopon*'s mouth in a secret language. To illustrate the power of this man (and his lineage) over the others, they told me that when sitting on top of all the others, he could defecate and urinate over the others if so he pleased, his subordinates having no right to protest. So there seems to be a certain hierarchy of lineages (as physically embodied in *amanco ngopon*), while at the same time all of them are equally indispensable. Baga people like

²³It may be interesting to note that among scholars working on the Mande-speaking Toma, where there is also a strong avuncular model, there is an unfinished debate regarding the pre-eminence of a bi- or of a tri-partite division of responsibilities (Hoejbjerg 1990, 1995, Leopold 1991).

to insist more on the second aspect than on the first one, and accordingly they present their society as erstwhile an harmonious democracy now broken down by external forces.

However, while I admit that there is a levelling element in the composition of the so-called Councils of Elders, there is also a built-in inequality not only in the fact that some lineages are superior to others, but also in that age and relative seniority is in itself an element on which power is based (as reflected in the very phrase "Council of Elders"). This paradox between an egalitarian democracy and built-in inequalities has shaped much of Baga recent history.

Before discussing in more detail the importance of age, let us say something more about what is meant by "Council of Elders."

There seems to be a double, almost contradictory meaning to the phrase "Council of Elders." Some authors suggest that the Council of Elders is a gathering of selected old men from different lineages who meet openly in order to discuss public matters, while others, on the contrary, assert that the members of such a council meet only in the sacred forest and discuss "secret" issues, important nonetheless for the well-being of the whole community. Stéphan Bouju has stated that "although they are very similar in their composition, we should distinguish between the Council of the Sacred Bush and the Council of Elders" (Bouju 1994 vol. I:189; my translation). He then elaborates on the role of the latter, which basically boils down to making public the secret decisions made by the Council of the Sacred Bush. (Unfortunately, Bouju does not clarify what these decisions have to do with, nor does he investigate the composition of such two parallel councils.)

While I think that Bouju has confusingly reified the two different councils and presented them as two well-defined institutions, I agree with him that the opposition between secret and public and between bush and village articulates much of the decision-making in any Baga village. My experience, however, was that a clear

distinction between two councils was only applicable to the village of Bukor. In this village, there is a Council of Elders (simply referred to as the *abeki*, “the elders”; sing. *wibeki*), made up of one man from each lineage of the village, which regularly meets in *delence*, a grove on the edge of the village. Each *wibeki* must have been initiated, and in principle he must be the oldest member of his lineage, also called the *wika kilō kipon* (“the one who lives in the *kilō kipon*”). In practice, however, the *wika kilō kipon* may delegate a younger classificatory brother to attend the meetings in *delence*. Each *wibeki* is responsible for his lineage, and for making sure that a payment (normally in palm wine) is made to the rest of the *abeki* every time a member of his lineage breaks a community rule. Apart from the *abeki* there are also the *alipne* (sing. *wilipne*; lit. “he who has finished”). The *alipne* meet in a grove in the middle of the village that no one else can visit, and where masks and other ritual objects are said to be kept. The difference between the *alipne* and the *abeki* is not clear. From what I was told in Bukor, the *alipne* are men who have been initiated into the *ter*, a cult to which only selected men could be initiated. I was also told that, in the past, the *alipne* group was made of men from each of the villages in which *amanco ngopon* is called *somtup* (see the division of spirit provinces in Chapter Two), that is, the three villages of *Takō* (Katako, Mare and Kakilenc), the three villages of *Mantung* (Bukor, Kufen and Kalikse) and the two *Dukfissa* villages (Kamsar and Calgbonto). Each one of these three provinces would choose a man to be initiated into the *ter* and therefore to become a *wilipne* and to represent the village vis-à-vis *somtup*.²⁴ But this is at any rate how things were in the past. (The Baga always insist that the connections between villages were in the past much stronger than today.) Today, the *alipne* only meet in Bukor and the group is exclusively made up of men from Bukor lineages. The group continues to deal with highly secret issues, notably with *somtup* and with witchcraft, but the exact differences between the nature of their decision-making and that of the *abeki* in *delence* was never clear to me.

²⁴While in Bukor I was told that initiation into *ter* was the highest possible level of initiation. Lamp, who by and large obtained his data in other villages, defines it as a “powerful organisation for adult men of lower ranking clans” (Lamp 1996b:262). This should warn us, again, of how contested and relative issues of rank and power are.

Since the dynamics of age and generational competition appear to have informed the recent history of the Baga (as seen in my introduction), I want to discuss some aspects of it here.

Once again one has to compare and distinguish what is found in the literature from what is actually found in the field. In the literature it is said that the Baga have four or five clear-cut “age groups.” These categories are (from the oldest to the youngest):

1. The *alipne* (sing. *wilipne*), or elders who have completed the whole initiation cycle, including the *ter*.
2. The *atem* (sing. *witem*); feminine *atemra* (sing. *witemra*), old people in general.
3. The *abeki* (sing. *wibeki*); feminine *abekira* (sing. *wibekira*), elders.
4. The *atemp* (sing. *witemp*); feminine *ayecra* (sing. *wiyecra*), young men and women.
5. The *awut* (sing. *wuan*) for both sexes (although the pl. feminine *awutara* is not unheard of), children.

According to the available literature, these categories constitute separate “age sets” not dissimilar to the ones reported in other African ethnic groups (see Bangoura 1972:23-26), Bangoura 1974:33-40), where the upgrading from one to another set is ritually marked by initiation processes. In this literature, the roles and responsibilities of each group would be well determined and fully consensual, and the upgrading from one to the other ritually marked.

In fact, however, what one finds in the field today is that these categories are not fixed. I found that instead of five categories, Baga people in their daily language would only use two categories: *wibeki(ra)* and *wan*, which I would translate as “adults” and “youths” respectively. The category of *witem/witemra* (p. *atem/atemra*) was also used from time to time to refer to very old men and women, those who do not work in the

fields and who are approaching death²⁵. To complicate the issue, the two categories of *wibeki* and *wan* are relative, so that every one is *wibeki* to someone else (his/her *wan*) and *wan* to others and vice versa. The category of *witemp* (“young man”) was very rarely used, and no one seemed able to elucidate to me what the difference between *witemp* and other categories could be.

To these categories of age groups we should add the cross-cutting category of *danapa*, not studied in the literature, but which I found very relevant to the analysis of age dynamics. *Danapa* means “generation.” One individual is *wanapa* to another one if he is classificatory son (*wan*) of the same *apa* (father), that is to say, if they both call the same individuals *apa* and *iya* (“father” and “mother”). All the *anapa* (individuals of the same generation) share kinship terms to refer to (although not necessarily to address) their classificatory grandfathers/grandmothers, fathers/mothers, brothers/sisters, sons/daughters and so on. This does not mean that they are all the same “age.” Two individuals belonging to the same *danapa* may be separated by more than thirty years but still be considered as classificatory brothers if their respective fathers are also classificatory brothers, although in these cases of big age difference the younger will address his older classificatory brother with the respectful term “*ntara*,” a Mande term applied to anyone for whom respect must be shown. To bring together the age groups with the *danapa* local classification, we can say that in general, members of any given *danapa* are *abeki* (elders) to the younger one(s) and *awut* (children) to the older one(s).

This said, in the villages where I did most of my fieldwork, such as Mare and Bukor, the structural opposition between *abeki* and *awut* was much more than an idiom to oppose different *danapa*. The fact that initiations in the sacred bush have disappeared since the 1940s and 1950s provides people with a clear-cut criterion to distinguish between who are the *abeki* and who the *awut*. Thus, all individuals who were initiated

²⁵ *Atem*, as well as *abiki*, are also concepts to refer to ancestors. The Baga have also the concept of *akur-anga* (sing. *wikur*), for people of former times. But the *akur-anga* are not ancestors of anybody. Their time has no continuity with human times or with genealogies; it is rather the *illud tempus* of mythical narratives and of popular stories (called *ca akur-anga*, i.e. “the things of the *akur-anga*”).

in 1948 (Mare) or 1952 (Bukor) are indisputably considered as *abeki*, while all the rest are *awut*. This has created a situation in which the elders of the village boast of having ritual knowledge of “secret” things that the *awut* do not have access to (since the re-introduction of initiation does not seem to be on the agenda of the elders). This has very strong implications in today’s discourses and practices concerning access to cultural resources, as I will show in Chapter Six.

3.7. Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that rather than as a set of organized institutions, Baga society could better be understood as an arena with a series of ideal typical forms in which meaning is contested. This has probably always been so (although data on pre-colonial political organisation is very scant). But it was with the imposition of chiefs by the French, with the eventual official reification of “noble Bagas,” “autochthonous families” and the like that contestation increased and eventually led to a rebellion normally expressed in terms of youths and strangers (and women) vs. elders. These are the historical events that I analyse in the next two chapters.

Chapter 4

The colonial legacy: Baga chiefs and Baga customs

4.1. Introduction

As I said in Chapter One, after having provided some basic ethnographic elements of Baga society in Chapter Three, Chapter Four reconnects, from a historical point of view, with the discussion offered in Chapter Two of the pre-colonial pattern that opposed mangrove and “paganism” vs. hinterland and Islam. As has also been said in the Introduction, a crucial aspect of discourses about Baga identity today is that this historical and cultural pattern was to suffer a gradual alteration during the period of French rule. It is normally assumed, although this needs some qualification, that Baga “paganism” was finally abandoned in 1956/57, when an eastern Muslim preacher, the Malinke Asekou Sayon, undertook a *jihad* against the conspicuous “pagan” elements of Baga society.

One thing that struck me during my research about this iconoclastic movement was that most of the time, if not always, when I asked Baga elders why they followed the Muslim Malinke in his *jihad*, the answer was “because we (“we” meaning the people who were young at the time) were tired of our custom” or “because our custom was too heavy a burden” or some other similar statement. With “custom” I am either translating what French speakers would say *coutume* or what Baga Sitem speakers would say *mes mabaka* (literally “the deeds/things of the Baga”). The Baga Sitem also used on occasions the hybrid expression “*kutum kabaka*,” hence testifying to a role of the French in forging and formulating the concept (*kutum* being of course an adaptation of French *coutume*).

I am not going to provide a full history of the Baga chieftaincies under French rule. Such an endeavour would be beyond the needs of my thesis. Yet, since the passage of Sayon is interpreted by the Baga themselves as the end of a period and of certain customs, it is necessary to describe the period and the customs in order to contextualize

the movement. I have called this chapter “chiefs and customs” because the two concepts epitomise the pressure under which the Baga had to live from the early 20th century to 1957. Indeed it was no coincidence that the main objective of the P.D.G.-R.D.A. political party (*Parti Democratique de Guinée-Rassemblement Democratique Africain*), the leading agent in the anti-colonial movement, was the abolition of the despotic “customary chieftaincy” created by the French. They even created a martyr of the Revolution out of M'Balia Camara, a female militant who died after being wounded by a customary chief in the coastal region of Dubréka early in 1955 (Cowan 1962:185; Rivière 1977:72). Although at a political level the abolition of the system of colonial chieftaincies in Guinea (an aim achieved in December 1957) has been the object of specialised political studies (Ameillon 1964, Suret-Canale 1966, Ramsis 1992), the actual ethnography of how Guineans lived under French-imposed chiefs and of how the R.D.A. and other political agents tried to undermine chieftaincies is to the present a big lacuna in Guinean historiography.

4.2. The canton and the delimitation of Baga territory

After the First World War, the French divided their African territories into *cercles*, each one containing various cantons. While each *cercle* was to be ruled by a French *commandant de cercle*, each of its cantons was to be ruled by a native chief, who in turn would have as his subordinates the chiefs of the villages under his territorial sovereignty. Although the French referred to the cantons as “traditional” or “customary” chieftaincies, they were aware that in many cases they created cantons where there had been no centralised political unity before.

The Guinean coast where the Baga lived was divided into two *cercles*: Boké and Boffa, each with several cantons. Those that contained Baga people were the *Canton Koba*, the *Canton Sobané* and the *Canton Monchon* in the *Cercle* of Boffa, and the *Canton Baga* in the *Cercle* of Boké. By looking at the archives of these respective cantons, it becomes apparent that the appointments of canton chiefs created despotic rulers. An extreme example of the despotism cantons could lead to was that of the *Canton Sobané*

of Boffa, which housed four villages (Douprou, Sobané, Coundinde, Foulaiiah) that comprised the pre-colonial Baga province of Kakissa (see Chapter Two). Kakissa under the leadership of the Soumah chiefly lineage became such a hard place to live in that by 1938 most of its population had fled elsewhere, either within Guinea or abroad (Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau)¹. According to documents consulted in Boffa, the complaints the population addressed to the administration were that “Bokary Soumah [the canton chief from 1932 onwards] is chasing the strangers out of the canton.” Now who the “strangers” were is difficult to establish. In any case, by 1945, when the canton had been annulled and the possibility of associating the four villages to the *Canton Monchon* was seriously contemplated, the elders of Douprou wrote letters to the *commandant de cercle* of Boffa insisting that they did not want to be ruled by Susu. They stated that the Susu were strangers of the Baga, and that theirs was a region of “pure” Baga that had to be ruled by Baga.

I am not concerned in this thesis with either the historical evolution of the Baga Kakissa or of the Baga Koba during colonial times. My work is rather aimed at analysing the cultural history of the Baga Sitem living in the Prefecture of Boké. I have only brought up this case because it can be considered as paradigmatic of the contradictions of canton territorial administration. Whatever the intentions behind the creation of the cantons², in reality French colonial administration created an ideal situation for some sectors of the population to claim “autochthony” (or other similar concepts) and chase away or despotically subordinate the strangers of their canton. I am not claiming that before the French administration, subordination did not exist or that

¹Cf. the documents in the A.P. Boffa, Box “Canton Sobané.”

²The intentions are not quite clear. Some authors, for instance Mamdani in his recent and influential book on colonialism (Mamdani 1996), seem to believe that cantons were created to divide the population in order to rule them better. However, after reading some works of one of the theoreticians of canton administration, William Ponty, I believe that behind what the French called “the politics of race” we would also find a rather humanitarian intention: namely to help minor ethnic groups to administer themselves and to protect them against the tyranny of bigger ones such as the Fulbe, the Malinke, etc. (on Ponty, cf. Anonymous 1915). It is also true, however, that these intentions did not deliver the “democratic” goods that the theoretician fathers of French colonial rule had expected.

strangers were not perceived as strangers³. I am only arguing that the French supported the opposition between natives and strangers and provided a whole set of strategies to legitimate it. One such strategy was preferring “customary” chiefs to strangers and forcing people to legitimate their candidacies to chiefdoms by proving their links with chiefly native lineages.

This natives/strangers opposition, which we will find again later in this chapter, is especially complicated and even paradoxical if we take into consideration two historical dimensions. Firstly, as I have argued in previous chapters, the incorporation of strangers into the Baga in pre-colonial times was not only non-problematic, but probably desired in this region of “asylum” and intensive rice/salt production. Secondly, it was in colonial times that most of today’s ethnic strangers in the *Bagatai* (Susu upland rice farmers, Jakhanke peanut farmers, together with Wolof, Malinke and some Fulbe traders) settled among the Baga. The arrival of the Susu among the Baga Sitem is documented in archives since the First World War, when the missionaries expressed their worry about the Muslim influence of the Susu on the Baga, whom the missionaries had started to convert. The Jakhanke, according to my field data, were first settled by the Baga Sitem in the village of Mare in the late 1940s. (For the arrival of the Jakhanke in the *Cercle* of Boké, cf. de Lavau 1958.)

4.3. The history of the *Canton Baga* of Boké

The region we know today as *Bagatai* and which is shared by Baga Sitem, Baga Pokur and Baga Fore was in colonial times divided in two different cantons. The *Canton Monchon* in the *Cercle* of Boffa housed the Baga Fore people together with the Baga Sitem villages of Bukor and Kalikse, while its neighbouring *Canton Baga* in the *Cercle* of Boké housed the Baga Sitem and the Baga Pokur. In what follows, I am going to

³The distinction between natives and strangers to a village is built-in in the very Baga Sitem language. For instance, the inhabitants of Mare are divided in *wimare* (pl. *amare*) and *wika mare* (pl. *aka mare*). A *wimare* is someone whose lineage originated in Mare, even if he/she does not live in Mare. A *wika mare* is someone who lives in Mare but who “belongs” to another village. There are also the *wicikra* (pl. *acikra* “strangers”), non-Baga people living in Mare. Thus, they have three linguistic categories to translate “inhabitants of Mare.”

focus on the history of the *Canton Baga*. A complete historical reconstruction of the *Bagatai* would include archival research on the *Canton Monchon*, but such research has become virtually impossible, since the archival material regarding this canton in the Prefectoral Archives of Boffa is lost. Yet, I hope that by a careful analysis of the *Canton Baga* of Boké we will get enough insights about the legacy of the colonial administration. Enough, that is, to help us understand the events that took place in 1956/57 which are analysed in the following chapter.

4.3.1 Early chiefs

According to documentation consulted in the Boké archives, the French administration of the Baga Sitem villages began in 1886⁴. Since their very first moment the French heavily relied on the chief of Katako, Baki Camara, to whom they referred as “the king of the Baga.” Since Baki Camara belonged to the *abanka* of *Kansomble*, it is possible that he was a descendant of the “kings” nominated by the Fulbe or other overlords in pre-colonial times. We have already seen in Chapter Two how the *Kansomble* people stole the “magical crown” of the *Dikawe*⁵. Unfortunately, there are no documents to explore what led the French to appoint Baki Camara as first chief of Katako in 1886. Another very important chief of the pre-canton years was the Muslim Amara Touré, chief of Katongoro between 1909 and 1919 (with interruptions), about whom the French wrote “this village chief would make a good canton chief”⁶.

⁴“*Renseignements individuels: Manga Baki.*” April 10, 1920. CB 2. In the remainder of the chapter, CB stands for the box “*Canton Baga*” of the Prefectoral archives of Boké. See Appendix 3 to the exact folder in which to find the document (For example, CB 1 = Box “*Canton Baga*,” Folder “*Almamy Sidi*”).

⁵According to one of the interviews I had with Nene Ali Bangoura, from Katongoro, the first *Kansomble* chief was Yayo Camara, father of Baki (while the previous chiefs, according to him, had all been from the *abanka* of *Dikawe*). The old man insisted that it was Yayo, and not Baki, who was the first chief nominated by the French. However, I have not found any archival material relating to the Baga prior to Baki’s nomination in 1886.

⁶*Renseignements individuels: Amara Touré.* nd. CB 6; my translation.

It is worth noting that the ambivalence between the Touré of *Kondayire* (one of the three *abanka* of Katongoro) and the Camara of *Kansomble* was accompanied by, if it was not the outcome of, religious tensions between the two lineages. The Touré, whose arrival among the Sitem was relatively late, were the first Muslim people among the Baga Sitem. In 1909, the year of Amara's appointment, the Touré built in *Kondayire* the first mosque among the Baga Sitem and started to Islamise the population of *Kondayire* and of the other two *abanka* of Katongoro. In 1913 a woman, probably a Touré, was killed in Katongoro for attempting to introduce female excision,⁷ and in 1914 the Touré housed a *sharif* who led the people in a revolt against the French administration.⁸ Although the chief of the *abanka* of *Pintankla*, Youssouf Camara, wanted the missionaries to settle in his *abanka*, the missionaries wrote, as early as 1909, that Katongoro was "too contaminated by Mahometanism"⁹ and started to cultivate their relations with Katako, where they eventually would build a big mission.

Baki Camara, like his relative Youssouf Camara from *Pintankla*, was also very fond of the missionaries. In this crucial year of 1909, he gave some land for the missionaries to build a *case de passage* in Katako, and in the late twenties he was Christianised before dying. His brother Tongo was reported by Raymond Lerouge to be their best ally and the "strongest enemy against Islam" in the region.¹⁰

What needs to be emphasised is that before 1922, the French were very imprecise about territorial limits and sovereignty. In some documents, for instance, "Katako" was used not only to refer to what later was to be the village of Katako, but also to what the French called, very vaguely, a "group" containing Bintimodia (by then one of the biggest Atlantic ports of the *Cercle* of Boké), Mare, Kakilenc, Katongoro, Kawass and

⁷ *Journal de la Communauté du Sacre-Coeur de Boké* (II), 4 April 1913. Archives des P.P. du St-Esprit. Henceforth *Journal Boké*.

⁸ *Journal Boké* (II), 28 Sept. 1914.

⁹ *Journal Boké* (II), 19 Feb. 1909.

¹⁰ Lerouge, "Généalogie des Chefs de Katako," in his *Micelanea quae...* Archives des P.P. du St-Esprit Box 296 A.

Kamsar.¹¹ In another document, Amara Touré of Katongoro was called “provincial chief” without any explanation of what “a province,” or “his province,” was. In 1915, according to a missionary source, there was a political division among the Baga because the administration appointed Amara as chief “not only of the village of Katongoro, but of the whole *Baga-ta* [sic.] who do not want anything to do with him.”¹²

The fact that both Baki Camara and Amara Touré ruled at certain points over such huge territories created confusion later, and still in 1938 French texts talked about Baki Camara as the “first canton chief of the Baga,” which we know is not true if we are to stick to the geographical and administrative definition of canton. At the same time, people from Katongoro were (and still are) convinced that the first canton chief was Amara Touré, probably because he was called by the French “chief (or “king”) of the Baga province,” or “chief of the *Bagatai*,” etc.

Both Amara and Baki were very good chiefs by any French standard, that is, in collecting taxes, increasing rice and palm oil production and in recruiting the so-called “volunteer” soldiers in 1916 and 1918 conscriptions. However, in 1922, when the cantons were officially created and delimited, Amara Touré was already dead and Baki Camara was far too old to be a chief. Although Amara's brother Ibrahima, then chief of Katongoro, was a good candidate, the French had by then realised that the Baga population were very reluctant to accept the authority of chiefs. The Baga were reported to be “undisciplined and individualist,” “anarchist,” and reluctant to accept “their own chiefs.” “The Baga had no chief previously and our organisation has created an artificial canton,” as Jean Romieux, *commandant de cercle* of Boké, acknowledged in November 1934. He insisted that in order to maintain the unity of the canton it was better to maintain a stranger as canton chief, as “Baga chiefs would be vexed to obey one of their own.”¹³ I have to say, nevertheless, that other French administrators (as

¹¹*Renseignements individuels: Manga Baki*. Boké April 10, 1920. A.P. Boké, CB 2.

¹²*Journal Boké* (III), 17 April 1915.

¹³Romieux, Jean. *Bakar Sidi Chef du Canton Baga*. CB 1.

well as Baga informants) claimed the opposite, that is, that Baga *did* have chiefs before 1886 and that the choice of the first chiefs was ascertained following pre-colonial chiefly or royal lineages. Whether this is true or not is an issue historians still have to settle.

4.3.2. Fulbe hegemony

For reasons that are difficult to establish, the French decided not to appoint anybody related to either Baki or Amara, and opted instead for the Fulbe Bakar Sidi Bary (whom the Baga remember as *Almami* Sidi, and as such I will call him), who had been working for the administration as an interpreter in the Fouta Djallon and as a chief of the recently-created Baga Sitem village of Kawass. He was a native of Timbo, where his cousin was also chief, and descendant through his mother of the family of Alfayas (*almamis* in the Fouta Djallon). That he was chief of Kawass illustrates how confused the issue of Baga “customary” chiefdoms was. Until 1922 Kawass did not exist as a village. It was a name used to refer to two *cibanka*, most probably formed out of fissions from Katongoro. When the French decided to call it a “village” and looked for the descendants of the founder of the village, the two *abanka* claimed to be descendants of such founders and therefore to deserve the chieftaincy.¹⁴ Unable to discover the truth and to decide which one of the two *cibanka* was the chiefly one, the French decided to appoint someone who had nothing to do with the village altogether: the Fulbe Bakar Sidi, who only a few months later was upgraded from village chief to canton chief.

There is an unfortunate lack of documents from 1922 to investigate what led the French to appoint no less than a Fulbe as chief of the whole *Canton Baga*. Maybe the reason was similar to that which had led them to chose him as chief of Kawass in the first place. That is, maybe the French, unable to decide whether *the* chiefly lineage of the

¹⁴For this conflict and Sidi's appointment, cf. the letter sent by the “Notables Kawassi-Bagas” to the *commandant de cercle* of Boké (14 June 1928) and the letter sent by Kalekè, Maliki *et al.* on June 17, 1928. CB 10.

Baga as a whole was that of Baki Camara of Katako or that of Amara Touré of Katongoro, decided to appoint a stranger to avoid jealousies and political divisions.

However, a document written by the *commandant de cercle* of Boké in 1936 provided an additional dimension to Sidi's appointment, relating it to the anti-clerical nature of the French colonial administration.¹⁵ According to this report, the French decided to appoint a Muslim Fulbe to counterbalance the actions in the region of the *Pères du St.-Esprit*. They had been established in Boké since 1897, and in 1922 they had already chosen Katako as their main mission site in the *Bagatai*. According to this report, the missionaries were not quite loyal to France, creating a "fief" out of the *Bagatai* and keeping for themselves the benefits that the Baga should offer to the Republic. The document hints, without accusing, at a possible retention of taxes by the missionaries, who in effect acted as administrative intermediaries between the illiterate population and the administration (this is testified to in various entries of the *Journal de la Communauté du Sacré-Coeur de Boké*).

As I have explained in Chapter One, the Catholic missionaries realised as early as 1898 that the Baga were a population that would be particularly easy to evangelise, given their fondness for palm wine and, especially, their aversion to Islam. Baki Camara and other chiefs, including his relative Youssouf Camara from Katongoro, had been giving lands to the missionaries between 1909 and 1914. For many years, the missionaries hesitated between establishing themselves in Katongoro or in Katako, and finally choose Katako given the strong opposition of the Touré Muslim and chiefly lineage in Katongoro. By 1922, Katako had already been chosen as their main centre in the *Bagatai* and there were also small parishes in Katongoro, Tolkoc, Minar, and Kufen.

The reign of *Almami* Sidi lasted fourteen years, from 1922 to 1936. The French had an ambivalent attitude towards him. On the one hand, he always managed to deliver taxes within due terms. On the other hand, however, they were aware of the fact that his

¹⁵Letter (17 June 1936) of *Commandant de Cercle* Martin-Chartrie to the Governor of Guinea. CB 1.

authority was not accepted by the Baga and that this created problems. Already in January 1923, *Almami* Sidi wrote a letter to the *commandant de cercle* presenting his resignation (indeed he signed it as “ex-chief of the Bagas”) arguing that he could not satisfy the French since the Baga did not like him despite all his efforts. In February 1924, Commandant Albert Casterman wrote a letter to the Governor of French Guinea in Conakry in which he accused *Almami* Sidi of being an “undisciplined, lazy coward, reluctant to obey orders, who has not been able to gain the confidence of the Baga despite my support, hence showing not only a bad faith, but also a worse intelligence.”¹⁶ Therefore, he suggested that *Almami* Sidi should be removed, but he could not find any suitable replacement and *Almami* Sidi was kept in office. We have here quite a paradoxical situation in which a canton chief is asking for his resignation and the French are also unhappy with him, yet nothing is done! That the Baga did not like *Almami* Sidi was, incidentally, still remembered by my elderly informants, who remembered him as a dictator who would use his power to force people to work for him and to enrich himself. In fact, this is more or less how all chiefs were remembered.

In connection with the tensions between the Catholic *Pères du St-Esprit* and the French administration which I have already pointed out, it is worth noting that Adolphe Kande Camara, who has written a rather confusing reconstruction of the history of the *Canton Baga*, states that some Catholic Baga elders went to see Raymond Lerouge, then Bishop of Conakry, in search of help against *Almami* Sidi's abuses. Yet, Lerouge could not do anything for them. The complaining elders went then to visit the *commandant de cercle* in Boké, who listened to their complaints, but eventually backed *Almami* Sidi and imprisoned those who had complained about him (Camara 1990:76). This episode, which I have been unable to double-check in either missionary or administrative sources, could be quite significant. It not only illustrates the tensions between Catholicism and the French administration but also reveals how useless and even how dangerous it was in the 1920s and 1930s to try to bypass the canton chief and to complain about him elsewhere. It was only after the Brazzaville Conference of 1946, with the creation of the French Union and the constitution of a Territorial Assembly,

¹⁶Letter of Commandant Casterman to the Governor of Guinea. CB 1; my translation.

that people could gradually start to challenge the power structures that were oppressing them. Before that, when Africans were subjected to the code of the *indigénat*, any opposition to the canton chief could be punished by the *commandant de cercle* without any further justification ("refusing to acknowledge authority" was in itself a criminal offence). Needless to say, that was a perfect recipe for allowing chiefs to become absolute tyrants.

However, aware of *Almami* Sidi's unpopularity, the French decided to move his headquarters from Kawass to Katongoro, thinking that the change would both do him good and keep a closer control over Katongoro people, especially the descendants of Amara Touré, who were reputed to be trouble-makers. It proved not to be such a good idea. As soon as he moved to Katongoro, in 1926, the villagers burned down his house. *Almami* Sidi's headquarters was then transferred to the edge of the *Bagatai*, to the trading centre and port of Bintimodia¹⁷. This was the only village in the canton not founded by Baga people and in which there were virtually no Baga inhabitants (although it had been founded in *Katbaka*, a bush given to the *Compagnie du Sénégal et de la côte occidentale française* by the Baga of Katako in 1886; cf. Anonymous 1929:16; Lerouge 1935:10-11). He was based there from 1926 to 1936, trying to be as little involved in Baga affairs as possible.

4.3.3. 1936: The Baga against their chief

No matter how hard *Almami* Sidi was trying not to become involved with his recalcitrant subjects, he did not fully succeed. In May 1936 the French sent a deputy administrator to carry out a census of the *Canton Baga*, and *Almami* Sidi's presence in this team was officially requested. On May 26, after they had been in the village of Kufen, where they had already found a very hostile attitude, an event took place in Tolkoc that was to change the history of the *Canton Baga* -on that day the Baga attempted to murder *Almami* Sidi. When the census party arrived in that village, they found a very antagonistic attitude among "all the Baga inhabitants of the village, plus

¹⁷"*Renseignements individuels: Amadou Touré*" (28 July 1928). CB 6.

fifty inhabitants of Kawass and Katongoro.”¹⁸ The village denied hospitality to the team. One of its spokesmen declared: “There is neither house nor water for the canton chief. We are going to tear him to pieces and he will never see Bintimodia again.” The tumult was eventually controlled thanks to the presence in the village of a few French-speaking elders who introduced themselves as First World War veterans and who proposed to act as intermediaries between the deputy commandant and the Baga. After long palavers, they managed to calm down the crowd, but as part of the improvised negotiations Deputy Commandant Lefevre had to promise the agitated Baga that *Almami* Sidi would “go back home and then to the Fouta,” as he explained in his report. (Incidentally, he did not fulfill his promise, and Bakar Sidi stayed on the coast till the end of his days.)

According to French documents, this murder had been planned by Youssoufou Touré, chief of Katongoro, and his brother Ibrahima, followed by the chiefs and elders of Kawass, Katako, Mare, and Tolkoc, and probably from other villages too. They had been secretly meeting on several occasions in order to plan it. The most important of these meetings took place in Boké in February 1936. In the trial that took place in Boké after the event, the accused men admitted that in that particular meeting they had made an oath to *amanco ngopon*. “Let *kakilambe* destroy the family of whoever follows the canton chief,” we can read in the confession of Youssoufou Touré, although he also clarified that he and the other Muslims in the meeting (in 1936 most village chiefs were Muslim) had not made any oath to *amanco ngopon* but instead shared a few kola nuts and read the Koran¹⁹.

As a matter of fact, whether or not the murder had been planned by the Touré brothers is not as clear as the French thought. By reading the confessions of the elders implicated and tried in Boké, it seems that the decision to kill *Almami* Sidi was made in common or, more precisely, by a council representing “all the Baga”; some of them

¹⁸*Procès verbal d'audition*; CB 1; my translation.

¹⁹*Tribunal du 1^{er} degré de Boké (Matière répressive), audience publique du 2 juillet 1936*, 19. CB 1.

clearly said that nobody could claim any particular responsibility. Yet, the French seemed reluctant to accept that responsibility for a crime could be allocated to a whole ethnic group or even to a council of elders and, by asking some leading questions, managed to inculcate Youssoufou Touré as the main perpetrator of the revolt. Having said that, it is also true that he seemed happy enough to be considered by the French in such a leading position. Accordingly, his sentence (two years in prison) and his brother's (a year and a half) were much longer than any of the others convicted (six months for each). This was the end of the chieftaincy of *Almami* Sidi. After this event, he was removed as canton chief, although he remained as village chief of Bintimodia for another year, before retiring to Tounifili (in Boffa), where he died some years later.

Both the Baga and the French could draw lessons from these events. For the Baga, it proved to them that against the canton chief, secret meetings and oaths to *amanco ngopon* had become useless. It is possible that before *Almami* Sidi, the power of the chiefs was limited or checked by the councils of elders. But the power of this new institution, the canton chief, was of a different nature. The power of this chief was unrestrained, and the complaints of the population would not affect it too much provided he accomplished his duties *vis-à-vis* the *commandant de cercle*.

As for the French, the lesson was that in order to rule the Baga, a Fulbe chief was not the best option. After *Almami* Sidi's attempted murder, the administration became determined to find a Baga chief. They even became determined to find the "customary" rules to appoint one and "discovered" that the principle was very simple: it could only be a chief who belonged to a lineage of chiefs. This principle, which had been loosely applied before (loosely enough as to appoint a Fulbe as canton chief while insisting on the lineage principle when appointing individual village chiefs), was to be strictly applied from 1936 onwards. In 1928, the *commandant de cercle* could still write: "The Baga have no aristocracy and no serfs. No family has a monopoly concerning the choice of chiefs. Very independent as they are, they chose whomever they consider best qualified to be on top and rule them."²⁰ Ten years later, the French were convinced that

²⁰*Renseignements individuels: Nabbit Camara*. Boké (1 Dec. 1928). CB 7; my translation.

the opposite applied, and that their role was to find out which families had the ruling “monopoly.”

4.3.4. The hegemony of Katako

After long consultations with the population, unfortunately not well documented in the archives, the French appointed as canton chief Salou Camara, from Katako, son of Baki Camara, to whom the documents still referred to in 1936 and 1938 wrongly as “the first chief of the *Canton Baga*,” and even as “the ancient Baga king”²¹. Salou was a First World War veteran and had had nothing to do with the Tolkoc rebellion against *Almami* Sidi. Being a war veteran was to become, by the way, an unwritten rule to be eligible as canton chief; only those who were so were contemplated by the *commandant de cercle* as possible candidates. Not that this made shortlisting any easier, for the number of veterans among the Baga has always been surprisingly high, both after the First and after the Second World Wars.

The population of Katongoro were not very pleased with this situation. They claimed that Amara had been the first chief of the *Canton Baga* and that the chieftaincy belonged to them. Yet, since both Yousoufou and his brother Ibrahima were imprisoned, there was not much they could do. Other villages with which the Touré had established alliances (especially Kawass, Tolkoc and Kufen) became strongly adverse to being ruled by Katako.

Salou Camara ruled from 1936 till his death in September 1942. When he died, many Baga men from different villages applied either to the *commandant de cercle* or directly to the Governor in Conakry, to the point that the former wrote in a letter (7 January 1943) to the latter that “all the Baga want to be canton chief!”²² From reading the

²¹*Renseignements individuels: Salou Camara*. Boké, 18 Sept. 1936. CB 3; my translation.

²²A.P. Boké CB 4.

candidates' letters and the answers to them, we realise the increasing importance of proving links with chiefly lineages in order to be eligible.

In March 1943, the *commandant de cercle*, after consultation with different village chiefs, appointed Kande Camara, younger brother of Salou Camara and hence son of Baki Camara, as canton chief. The *commandant de cercle* wrote with a tone of satisfaction: "Appointment according to tradition. Normal succession of his brother. Both descendants of ancient king of the Baga."²³

Kande ruled even more despotically than his predecessors, though he kept the *commandant de cercle* happy since the "rice campaigns" (collections of massive amounts of rice during the Second World War) were very satisfactory under his rule. Incidentally, the increased production and exportation of rice during the wars, especially the second, what the French called "the war effort," was probably one of the reasons why chiefs had to become despotic and created a general feeling of oppression and resentment, as was pointed out to me by many Guinean intellectuals and informants in general.

An anonymous letter (31 August 1947) signed by "your Baga children" and addressed to the Governor of Guinea in Conakry said about Kande: "He wants nothing but to enrich himself. He turns people against their chiefs. Examples: Katongoro and Missira, Kawass and Katakodi. He kills big men who might become canton²⁴".²⁵ The accusation of canton chiefs killing their potential rivals, which had been made earlier against Salou, was to be repeated later against Donat Camara, Kande's relative and successor.

²³*Renseignements individuels: Kande Camara*. nd. CB 4; my translation.

²⁴Still today, Baga people use the word "canton" as synonym of "canton chief."

²⁵CB 4.

Kande Camara ruled until his death in 1950. As with his brother Salou, Kande's death provoked another big successional. Again, many candidates wanted the chieftaincy. This time, candidates who could not prove their kinship links with the Camara of Katako were sent a formal letter simply stating that "the current texts foresee that only members of the families of original canton chiefs can be candidates,"²⁶ or that "not being a member of the traditional family of the chieftaincy you cannot be candidate,"²⁷ or other similar phrasings.

This strong official insistence on chiefly lineages was particularly unfortunate for the non-Baga members of the community, especially for the Susu, who, from Bintimodia, were establishing themselves in every Baga village. In fact, by arguing that the village of Bintimodia had been founded by a Susu man (Binti Moudou), Thierno Kaba, grandson of Binti Moudou, managed to get support from the Conakry authorities, who admitted that he had "a certain customary right" to be chief. In a long letter, Kaba had explained that the *Canton Baga* had always contained a big Susu contingent (together with Malinke, Jakhanke, Fulbe and Mikhifore) and that the succession should alternate between the Susu of Bintimodia and the Baga of Katako as it did, according to him, in the *Canton Monchon* of the *Cercle* of Boffa.²⁸ Yet, in the end his candidature was still refused by the *commandant de cercle* on the simple grounds of his not being "a member of the traditional family of Katako chiefs"²⁹. Other candidatures were explicitly ruled out because the candidate was Susu and not Baga. Candidates had to make it clear in their letters that they were not strangers but natives to the *Bagatai*. Some people claimed they were not strangers but no less than "Baga nobles"³⁰; so much for a people who, according to the French, had no aristocracy...

²⁶Letter (8 November 1950) by Gennet to Karimou Sidibe, a Susu, chief of Bintimodia. CB 4.

²⁷Letter (7 Nov. 1950) of Gennet to A. Bangoura. CB 4.

²⁸Letter (17 Dec. 1950) of Thierno Ousmane Kaba to the Chief of the Political Bureau. CB 4.

²⁹Letter (7 Nov. 1950) of the *Commandant de Cercle* of Boké to Thierno Ousmane Kaba. CB 4.

In the midst of Kande's successional problems, in November 1950, Philippe Gennet, *Commandant de Cercle* of Boké, wrote a report concluding: a) that Katako was the most important Baga village and “the most representative village of Baga customs,” b) that even before the French, the chiefs of other Baga villages were appointed by the chiefs of Katako, and c) that the Touré of Katongoro were in reality Baga Fore from the Rio Pongo (i.e. Boffa) who had been settled in the region by the Baga Sitem of Katako in the days of Yayo Camara (father of Baki Camara), at the end of the 19th century.³¹ This preference of Gennet for the Camara of Katako worried many people. In another letter, signed by the village chiefs of Kamsar, Calgbonto, Tolkoc, Kufen, Minar, and Mbotin, the *commandant de cercle* was asked not to impose any more chiefs from Katako.³²

A letter sent to Gennet by a man from Kawass (1 Nov. 1950) argued that the French had not understood that before their arrival the *Bagatai* had two kings: one in Katako (Baki Camara) and another one in Kufen (Bakoumé). According to this text, *Mange Baki*³³ ruled over Katako, Mare, Kamsar, Katongoro, Kawass and Bintimodia, while *Mange Bakoumé* ruled over Kufen, Tolkoc, Minar and Mbotin.³⁴ Whether this claim corresponds to any historical truth is difficult to establish, but it is true that the French put Katako in an over-ruling position that it had never enjoyed before. Under the French not only were Katako's chiefs meant to rule the whole Baga territory, but they were also given the responsibility of choosing and appointing the village chiefs. In Kufen, to name the very village where this alleged *Mange Bakoumé* had ruled, as soon

³⁰See, for instance, the letter (28 Dec. 1950) of B. Bangoura to the *commandant de cercle*. CB 4.

³¹Gennet, Philip. *Chefferie Baga et Mikifore*. Boké, 1 November 1950. CB. 4.

³²Letter signed in Taigbè (Tolkoc) on Nov. 26, 1950. CB 4.

³³ *Mange* or *manga* means “chief” or “king” in Susu and other Mande languages. Its Baga Sitem equivalent is *wibé* (pl. *abé*), but Baga people always use *mange* when speaking or writing in French.

³⁴AP. Boké CB 4.

as Kande was elected as canton chief in 1943, he nominated a new village chief (Moussa Bangoura) who was not a direct descendant of Bakoumé, and whose position was revoked by the French in 1948 for “lack of authority” and “hostility to the commercialisation of rice.” In fact, during the first year of his rule, Kande managed to change virtually all the chiefs of village and to appoint men favourable to him.

At the same time, the people from Katongoro strongly emphasised in a letter to Gennet that the chieftaincy should return to Katongoro, “where it was created,” or at least that it should alternate between the two villages.³⁵ The dispute between the two villages, that is, between the Touré of Katongoro and the Camara of Katako, was becoming nasty. The final contest between the two candidates Gatien Camara of Katako and Fode Touré of Katongoro even became violent, and Fode Touré would have won had it not been that Gennet was convinced, as we have seen, that the Touré were the “strangers” of the people of Katako and that Katako was the village that deserved the “customary” chieftaincy. The episode of Gatien's election is in fact very obscure. It seems that it was Gennet who forced Gatien to put in his candidature. Gatien was not living in Guinea but in Casamance (Senegal), where he was a policeman. He went down to Boké and Katako for the election in December 1950, but as soon as he won, he went back to Senegal and a few weeks afterwards he renounced his candidature and preferred to remain a policeman. Rumour has it that he was afraid of witchcraft, the same witchcraft that reputedly had disposed of Kande.

After Gatien's few weeks of rule, Donat Camara (from the same lineage) was elected chief. He ruled from 1951 to 1957, therefore being the last canton chief ever. He was no better than his predecessors had been. Even the French administrators expressed a clear aversion to his authoritarian methods.³⁶ Donat, who died around 1990, was remembered with disgust by many of my informants.

³⁵Letter (26 Nov. 1950) by the notables of Katongoro to the *Commandant de Cercle*. CB 4.

³⁶Commandant Conso, *Bulletin individuel: Donat Camara*. 3 Jan. 1953; Commandant Kergomand, *Services rendus et renseignements divers*. 10 July 1953. C.B. “Donat Camara.”

As with his predecessors, Donat Camara managed to engineer the appointment of village chiefs. In 1954 he even succeeded in putting an end to the Touré chieftaincy in Katongoro and appointed instead Gaspard Camara, from the *abanka* of *Pintankla* (whose father's brother had been village chief during the First World War), who was not only his relative, but also a Christian. Having a Christian village chief was to help people of Katongoro later, as we will see in the next chapter.

4.4. The despotism of chiefs and the rise of political awareness

After this historical view of the evolution of the *Canton Baga*, I would like now to provide some instances of the abuses of chiefs in order to help us understand why people were so eager to put an end to this institution.

From Missira (the Susu name of Kabac, a small hamlet attached to Katongoro) a letter from 1951 accused the chief of imposing non-legitimate taxes in the form of eggs,³⁷ and another one from the same year accuses him of asking for money for a customary celebration. “*C'est la coutume*” was all that the chief had to say.³⁸

From Kawass, a letter from the elders of the four *abanka* of the village, written in 1952, denounced the chief of the village for having kept for himself what the villagers were giving to the *Société de Prévoyance Indigène*, for asking people to pay 750 francs each time they had to bury someone, for forcing women to sleep with him and for “not listening to the elders.”³⁹

From the Baga Pokur village of Mbotin, we have a letter written in 1954 by the council of elders of that village to the Governor of Guinea in which they complained about their village chief for demanding taxes from non-taxable individuals, for forcing people

³⁷Letter (22 Nov. 1951) of M. Tambassa to the *Commandant de Cercle*. CB 15.

³⁸*Compte rendu de Missira le 3 Decembre 1951*. CB 15.

³⁹Letter (4 March 1952) sent by Issifou Camara (Kawass) to the chief of *Canton Baga*. CB 10.

to work in his own plantation (at a time when compulsory labour had been abolished, as they took care to recall) and for making daily life difficult in general. The letter finished by accusing the Canton Chief Donat Camara of being the cause of the general upheavals taking place in the *Canton Baga*.⁴⁰ Another document from Kabac or Missira (1954) testified to a severe beating of a villager by a chief when the former refused to pay a tax.⁴¹

From Kufen, a letter signed in October 1956 by thirteen men accuses the village chief of harassing any beautiful woman he encounters, of living “in a European style of family life,”⁴² of drinking too much, of dressing too beautifully and of not wanting to do any work. Interestingly, in the same letter they asked the *commandant de cercle* to change the chief and propose instead a certain Bamoky Bangoura who was not only a member of their R.D.A. committee in Kufen, but also a “descendant of the only royal family of the village,” that is, a descendant of *Mange Bakoumé*, the lineage whose rule in Kufen Kande Camara had interrupted.

It is interesting to notice the evolution of the language in the letters sent by Baga villagers. In the letters written in the 1950s, one can see how a post-1946 political awareness is little by little reaching the villages. Thus, one letter talked about the impossibility of forcing people to work against their will, against their conscience, and against the spirit of the 1946 Constitution, which, they recalled, was “against the exploitation of man by man.”⁴³

In another bold letter (7 Feb. 1953) written by the elders of Kufen in 1953, they not only accused the village chief of imposing taxes on children under 14 years old (for

⁴⁰ Letter (16 Feb. 1954) to the Governor of Guinea by the *notables* of Mbotin. CB 14.

⁴¹ *Gendarmerie Nationale. Plainte de M. Bangoura contre M'Bemba Keita*. CB 15.

⁴² Letter (7 Octobre 1956) of the wards' *notables* of Kufen. CB 11. Jean Suret-Canale pointed out that the opulence of chiefs and their thirst for European goods was one of the reasons why they became so detested by the population (Suret-Canale 1970:96).

⁴³ Letter (17 March 1956) by the *notables du village* of Kufen. CB 11.

which, they recalled, he should be sent to prison), but actually accused the *commandant de cercle* himself of being an accomplice: "We now start to understand your ways. You seem to push your canton and village chiefs to trade on us. We are no longer in Vichy times and we demand that justice and peace be done (...). If you are incapable of doing justice according to common rights and of judging problems impartially, then we will go elsewhere so that justice be done."⁴⁴ Of course, it was only because they had "elsewhere" to go (political parties and the Territorial Assembly) that they could dare to address their *commandant de cercle* in such threatening terms.

Another letter (November 1954) from the same village to Commandant Kergomard opened with the following terms: "It is because we know of your indulging goodness and your sympathy for human peasants, that we dare to write to you..." and then they complained about the canton chief stealing tax money and of not being "a good representative of France and of the French Union (...). We must go to the Territorial Assembly⁴⁵ to appeal for our peace (...) [Donat] has robbed us poor peasants too much (...). M. Kergomard and M. Donat will soon know what we the Baga are like."⁴⁶

What I am getting at by quoting these few letters (and I am only quoting a few of them) is two different things. First, that in the 1950s the villagers had certainly learned how to use the institutions they had at hand in order to fight the oppression they lived under, although this did not mean that the oppression ceased immediately. Second, that it is my suspicion that these letters and their language of "common rights," "poor human peasants," "conscience," "exploitation of man by man," etc. testify to a collaboration of peasants with more politically educated people. In fact, peasants did not write; they did

⁴⁴Letter by the "Notables" of Kufen. CB 11.

⁴⁵From 1953 the spokesman of the R.D.A. in the Territorial Assembly was Sékou Touré. In January 1954 there were legislative elections in which the R.D.A. obtained a clear majority, although the results were falsified. As Suret-Canale has observed, the electoral campaign for this election "provided the occasion for the P.D.G. to create among the peasantry the organised bases that had been so far impossible to create due to the terror inspired by the institution of the chieftaincy" (Suret-Canale 1970:161; my translation).

⁴⁶Letter (12 Dec. 1954) by the village chiefs and notables of the *Canton Baga*. CB 11.

not even speak French (not even a canton chief like Kande Camara could speak French). The letters, dictated in Baga, were obviously translated and written down by either a public scribe or a relative who could write in French, and who could change the phrasing as he saw fit. I am not saying that Baga peasants were not politically minded or that they were unaware of the colonial situation they lived in, but only that the writing and phrasing of these letters testifies to a complicity of the peasants *stricto sensu* and members of the community who were much more educated than they, and who were numerous. In one of these letters I found in the archives of Boké it was explicitly said that in the *Canton Baga* “the majority are intellectuals” and that therefore it was no longer easy to exploit the peasants.⁴⁷

This richness in intellectuals among the Baga was, according to one of my intellectual informants in Conakry, what explained the developments of the last year of colonialism, in particular the welcome of the Muslim preacher Asekou Sayon to the villages and the abandonment of many of the Baga ritual practices and objects that were perceived as being negative for the development of the community. By 1956/57 the presence of intellectuals in the villages would create an awareness of “backwardness” among certain Baga. Apart from intellectuals, there were also many war veterans who had been abroad, many of whom had converted to Islam during their service. These people realised that there was a three-tier connection between the “paganism” imputed to the Baga, the despotic rule of chiefs and elders, and the backwardness of their region.⁴⁸ It is worth noting that already in the very early 1950s, candidates for canton chief who were based in Conakry or elsewhere (one wrote from Freetown) insisted on their potential for development of the region by introducing “modern crops” such as oranges, avocados, limes, mangoes, and kola.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Letter (22 March 1956) to the Governor. CB 11.

⁴⁸ For broader implications of Second World War veterans’ reincorporation in Guinea and their conversion to Islam, see Goerg 1992 and Triaud 1992.

⁴⁹Cf. the letter of M. Camara to the Governor of Guinea. Freetown, Dec. 29, 1950. CB 4.

But in order to conduct this agricultural modernisation the forest had first to be cleared, a difficult task to undertake when the forest is perceived as a “sacred” place. The movement that was to de-sacralize the forest⁵⁰, put an end to the chieftaincy, and open up the *Bagatai* will be the object of the next chapter.

4.5. The burden of being Baga in colonial times

So far in this chapter I have focused on the institution of the chieftaincy, as this was the principal mechanism that oppressed people during French colonial times. Jean Suret-Canale singled out three major areas of colonial pressure by chiefs, and three reasons why they became so unpopular: tax collection, compulsory labour recruitment and military recruitment. On top of that, they demanded to be transported in hammocks and liked to live, as we have seen, in a European way, with big houses, cars, and so on.

But the rise of despotic rulers is not the only oppressive development Baga people experienced in colonial times. We have already seen in this chapter the problem of relations between natives and strangers, which is crucial in order to understand the end of the colonial period. When I carried out my research on the iconoclastic movement of 1956/57, many Baga people told me that if Asekou Sayon managed to know where the objects of the Baga were, it was because the strangers (and especially the Susu) told him where they were kept.

We have also seen in this chapter that the French used the concept of “custom” to legitimate the institution of the chieftaincy. In the remainder of the chapter I want to focus on this concept in order to more fully address the question we opened this chapter with, and to be prepared to understand the welcoming of the Muslim preacher Asekou Sayon discussed in the next chapter.

⁵⁰More than a “de-sacralization” of space, what people did by clearing the forest was a “de-secretization” of space. A space that before was only to be visited by initiated elders was now to become a public space for the benefit of the whole community. Many of the groves cleared in the 1956/57’s *jihad* were destined for mosques or for public schools. I will come back later to this creation of a public space by appropriating the secret one.

A paradoxical characteristic of the colonial state was that it endowed itself with the capacity to decide what was and what was not customary. In 1950, for instance, Commandant Gennet wrote: "The normal rule of succession is from uncle to nephew" (which incidentally is very inaccurate) and ruled out at least two Susu candidates by informing them that "customary rules" forbade Susu to be chiefs of Baga. But why should the colonial state inform its subjects of their own customary rules? If they were really customary, there would be no need for the state to act as informant on custom.

Political scientist Mahmood Mamdani (1996) has recently argued that the redefinition of customary rules and precepts served both as a legitimisation of colonial rule and as a way to "containerise" ethnic groups into their own little worlds. I think the Baga would agree with him, as they perceive their customs as something that was keeping them behind the flow of modernisation, something they had to get rid of in order to fully belong to the alternative community represented by the R.D.A.

In fact, when the Baga said that they were tired of their custom, they did not mean only that they were tired of the oppression of customary chiefs. They also seemed to mean that they were tired of everything that was defined as customarily Baga, and especially initiations and any other thing related to the sacred bush and to the demands of the elders who met there. Most of the accounts of what Baga society was like before colonial rule portray an unjust gerontocracy, a regime in which youths and women were severely oppressed by elder males. Most of the time one gets the picture of a society in which elders did nothing but drink the palm wine that youths had to tap for them. This had already been noticed in April 1913 when a Catholic missionary visited Katako and attended an *abol* masquerade:

In Katako, Father Labiouse has attended the ceremony of *aboul* [*sic.*], a god that appears only every fifteen years; the fifteen or twenty elderly men who tyrannise the village seize the opportunity to make the youth tap all the palm trees in the neighbourhood.⁵¹

⁵¹ *Journal Boké* (II), 24 April 1913; my translation.

The amount of palm wine that youths had to tap was immense, especially in the mid-1950s, since it is clear that most of the palm trees in the *Cercle* of Boké were planted in the 1940s and 1950s. "We could never rest" recalled a man from Mare: "In the morning we had to go to the rice fields, and then, as soon as we arrived back in the village, we had to go and climb the palm trees in order to tap the wine for the elders."

This was due in part to the lineage structure of society. Every time a man and a woman from different *abanka* were going to get married, the groom and other peers from his *abanka* had to tap palm wine not only for the lineage of the woman, but for her whole *abanka*, and not only once, but on many occasions. Marriages were not the only occasions on which one *abanka* had to present palm wine to another one; palm wine was involved in any ceremony, and ceremonies there were many, far too many: marriages, funerals, *nimba* masquerades, *acol* masquerades, *amanco ngopon* masquerades, *abol* masquerades, the "closing of the earth," the "opening of the earth," and so on. All these ceremonies took place in different villages and people were then much more compelled to participate in other villages' activities than they are today⁵². Being "pagan" was hard work for the youths and very pleasant for the elders. It is not surprising that the arrival of a new religion which not only forbade masquerades and sacred bushes but the very tapping and drinking of palm wine was attractive for youths who felt increasingly abused by their elders. It should be remembered that all this was happening at a time when youth was becoming very self-conscious as social agent, not only in West Africa but at a global level (Goerg 1989), and that this self-consciousness was brought into the villages by the *Jeunesse du Resselement Démocratique Africain* (the youth wing of the R.D.A.)

In connection with the community aspect of custom, I was once told that the reason why marriage payments were done with palm wine and not with money was that palm

⁵²Paradoxically, this is an aspect of custom that people are particularly nostalgic for today. In my very first week of fieldwork, when I was first told of Sayon and of his destruction of the Baga customs, Kande told me, "Now we want custom back, because with custom we could go from one village to another," a phrase that did not make much sense to me then.

wine was something that people *had to* share. It was given in public and in very large quantities (several vessels, each containing at least twenty litres), and by its very nature it stimulated sharing (lone drinkers being rather unusual, even today). "With money" I was told, "you can never be sure that what you give to a representative of an *abanka* is really going to be shared by the whole *abanka* and is not going to stay in his own pocket." This is an interesting interpretation, one which opposes palm wine to money, communality to individualism and custom to selfishness.

But the 1950s were years when money was increasingly used in marriage payments and when people started to think that there was no need to compensate a whole *abanka* for a woman of one of their lineages. It was a time when some people were earning money in the towns and there were those in the villages who were eager to earn some as well.

The combination of French and native agencies in the making of Baga custom is so intertwined that it becomes difficult to tell them apart. For instance, we have seen that the Baga youths had to spend enormous amounts of time in the palm trees tapping palm wine for customary reasons (marriage payments, elders' ritual meeting, etc.). Now, we cannot fail to notice that many of the palm tree plantations in the Baga region were in fact promoted by the French to increase the production of palm oil.⁵³ The palm-wine was, to put it this way, a by-product that the French were not directly interested in, but that perfectly suited the Baga social life, or a stratum of it at any rate. The same goes for many of the customary occasions on which the palm wine was used. Although referred to by them as customary celebrations, many were celebrations supported by French authorities or by the local chiefs. Even the missionaries complained about the huge amounts of masquerades that the Baga were required to perform for the French authorities of the *cercle*⁵⁴. In 1955, when it was clear that Muslim ideals were behind many anti-colonial movements, a note written by the *Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes*

⁵³In 1951, for instance, *Commandant de Cercle* Louis Mangin wrote: "The efforts that the administration has done for the development of palm trees in this canton urge us to put an end to its increasing anarchy." Letter (14 Feb. 1951) to the Governor of Guinea. CB 5; my translation.

⁵⁴*Journal Boké* (II), 14 and 15 July 1914.

said: "In Guinea, the animist populations of the forest and of the coast, visited by Christian missionaries, must be urgently preserved against Muslim apostolate" (quoted in Triaud 1997b; my translation). In fact, the support (even military if necessary) of "pagan" societies and their "preservation" against Islam had always been implicit in the administration of West Africa, both as a tool to counterbalance the strength of Islam and as part of the more or less humanitarian agenda of the *politique des races* (Harrison 1988:29-56). Administrators like Maurice Delafosse or Jacques Brévié wrote specifically on that issue from relatively early dates (Delafosse 1922, Brévié 1923; the two authors mention the Guinean coast as a particularly "animistic" region). Some of my elderly Baga informants told me that one of the reasons why Sayon was so welcome was because they knew that there was a connection between chieftaincy and "paganism" and that the two things had to be terminated together.

According to many informants, the individuals who were behind Asekou Sayon's invitation were not only those close to the R.D.A., but more precisely individuals who were "*anciens combattants*" (war veterans), who had been outside the villages during the Second World War. They became outsiders in their own villages and adopted very critical attitudes towards local customs. Many of them had been converted to Islam during the war. It was mostly they who wanted to finish with the "containerisation" of their society, which they perceived as keeping them backward, and who wanted to belong to a much broader community. And this is precisely what the P.D.G.-R.D.A. and Islam, or the combination of both, could offer. Although the R.D.A. cannot be defined as a religious movement, Islam became the means by which R.D.A. leaders could reach the population. Mosques were created and used as meeting places, and the Friday prayers were the main occasions to spread R.D.A.'s ideals. Ruth Morgenthau has written that "in the mosques, prayers drew an implied parallel between the community of the R.D.A. and the community of Islam" (Morgenthau 1964:237). The R.D.A. was instrumental in bringing the discontented Baga together and making them work towards specific purposes. Even before the elections of January 1956, in 1955 the missionaries of Katoko wrote after a visit to Bukor: "This 'society' [R.D.A.] seems to

be the only one able to get the Baga organised and working together.”⁵⁵ This is indeed an insightful remark, which should be kept in mind to understand the developments we will be analysing in the next chapter.

4.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined several political developments that occurred among the Baga, and especially among the Baga Sitem, under French rule. I have singled out the despotism of chiefs and the reification of customs as the main oppressions that the Baga suffered, as these are the two most likely to be mentioned by Baga elders today. Both of them were in the last analysis manipulated by the French. Yet, as far as I have been able to make out, Baga villagers were never really interested in getting rid of the French. Strictly speaking, what oppressed them was not the French themselves, but rather the chiefs and the customs. In this, I do agree with Mamdani, for whom both chieftaincies and customs were but institutional “shields” that would absorb the shocks from the discontent population leaving the European colonisers quite well protected (Mamdani 1996). It was therefore not the French that they wanted to get rid of but rather those Baga cultural elements they felt to be so oppressive.⁵⁶

The best way of getting a feeling of what Baga society was like in the 1950s is by reading Denise Paulme’s and André Schaeffner’s articles. In 1996, a year before she passed away, Denise Paulme acknowledged to me that she was surprised when she learned (in the 1980s) that there were still Bagas in Guinea, since what she saw in the 1950s was far from being a healthy and viable society. The pessimistic impression of Baga society with which she was left in 1954 can be gauged in a few quotations:

⁵⁵Mission de Katako. *Cahiers de tournées*. Archives des PP. du St.-Esprit, B 792.

⁵⁶As an aside, I will point out that for some African intellectuals to describe the R.D.A. as an “independentist” movement is inaccurate, since the R.D.A.’s main political objective, they say, was the application of the democratic citizenship promised in Brazzaville Conference and not necessarily the end of French presence in Africa (Zinsou 1987). But from the little I know, I suspect this is a very contested subject and I am sure other intellectuals would argue to the contrary. In any case, it is also true that Guineans democratically decided *not* to be part of the French community proposed by De Gaulle in September 1958.

Pressed from every side, Baga society appeared to be torn to pieces: village chiefs against canton chief, family against family, youth against the elders, the latter intractable, everyone exhausted from the battles for prestige where every new incident reignites quarrels poorly extinguished. Virtually no authority had succeeded, except that one time the administration named a foreigner as canton chief, without agreement among the notables. More and more numerous are the young men who abandon their village for a nearby urban environment, where they hope to escape all control. Those who remain marry strangers, convert to Islam, and reject their former identity. (Paulme 1956:101; cited in English in Lamp 1996b:224, translation of Lamp slightly altered).

Paulme went on to the dull prediction I mentioned in my introduction:

Baga society appears condemned by a lack of solidarity, by a lack of internal cohesion, and by a lack of natural pride too; neighbouring, more healthy societies will soon have absorbed it. As it is now, one can still observe some institutions that the sociologist will regret not to have studied in more detail. (Paulme 1956:102; my translation).

In another article, she expressed her perception of anomie by stating that:

A Baga can only conceive of his society in terms of divisions: the Bangoura against the Camara, the *asuto* against the *kulokinkaykosi*, youths against elders, men against women, the atmosphere is of a constant rivalry. Let a pressure from the exterior intervene and switch on this factor of internal disunity and the explosion will soon come. (Paulme 1957:277; my translation).

We have to give here a lot of credit to Denise Paulme as an ethnographer. In only a few weeks of fieldwork was she able to assess the social preconditions of the religious movement that two years later would provoke this internal "explosion" articulating the fight of the R.D.A. against the chiefs, the youths against the elders, the women against the men and the strangers vs. the Baga. In my view, Paulme was right in her perception of a "factor of internal disunity." Probably, this factor was at its peak in the mid 1950s. Yet, in this chapter we have also seen that Baga society has its factors of union too. In 1936, for instance, all the Baga villages agreed to murder *Almami* Sidi by making an oath to *amanco ngopon*. In fact, I think that today we are witnessing a movement towards union and towards community reconstruction, albeit not completely free of disunions and divisions. But before we go to describe today's situation, let us examine, in Chapter Five, the religious movement in which all this colonial situation we have been describing culminated.

Chapter 5

Youths vs. elders: The politics of an iconoclast movement

5.1. Introduction

After having discussed the evolution of the Baga under Baga chiefs up to 1956/57, I am going to analyse in this chapter the arrival of the Muslim preacher Asekou Sayon and the iconoclast *jihad* that he conducted among the Baga, which brought that period to an end. In terms of duration, the events were relatively brief (less than a year), yet their cultural implications for contemporary Baga discourse about identity and culture are huge. Although the *jihad* has many dimensions, I have called this chapter “youths vs. elders” because I want to emphasise the generational conflict, which is present in all the accounts I gathered and which will be compared later on with the situation Baga people live in nowadays.

5.2. The events

As will become apparent later, it would be hard to establish when and where Asekou Sayon did start his *jihad* against “sorcery and fetishism” in Guinea. He was probably a *jihadist* already in the 1940s. For the specific case of the Baga Sitem we know that his *jihad* took place between August or September 1956 and May 1957¹. Although I have visited some of the Baga Fore villages where he conducted his *jihad* (Monchon, Kifinda, Diogoya, and the mixed village of Yampon) and gathered accounts among informants there, it is especially the Baga Sitem that my analysis will concentrate.

The first Baga Sitem village Sayon visited was Bukor, then in the *Cercle* of Boffa. It was at the end of July 1956, some elders recall, that the Baga of that village first heard of him, while he was performing *kalimas*² in the village of Yampon, a bit farther south.

¹Dates established thanks to the *Journal de Katako*. Archives des PP. du St.-Esprit. Box 297.

²*Kalima* is the basic form of the Islamic creed or *shahada*. It is recited in Arabic in this way: “*la ilah ill’Allah; Mohammed rasul Allah*” (“there is no other God than Allah; Mohammed is the messenger of Allah”). It is possible that the ceremonies *jihadists* like Asekou Sayon (and many others) performed against the enemies of Islam were called *kalima* because that is what they kept singing while inviting people to surrender their evil objects, denounce evil doers and

He was said to be powerful and to detect evil doers. He was also reported to be teaching some beautiful Sufi songs to the young people. Some Baga youths became very curious about it all. At that time, the youths were at odds with their elders for many reasons, but one of them seemed crucial and is typical of the accounts I have gathered: that the elders did not want them to attend the *soirées dansantes* of the *Jeunesse du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (J.R.D.A.).

One informant once told me that the main reason why such dances were forbidden to the youths was that they contained flute musicians. Flutes were unknown to the Baga, and the elders considered that the sound of this new instrument was too similar to the awesome howling of *amanco ngopon* in the sacred bush. In a way they considered that by playing flutes, the youths were appropriating and bringing into the public *abanka* a secret item that belonged to the sacred bush. “We did not know that” my informant told me; “but they would not tell us. They would just forbid the playing of flutes in the village without any explanation.” The dynamics between what belongs to the sacred bush and what belongs to the *abanka* still articulates Baga society, as I have argued in Chapter Three.

Some young people of Bukor, angry at their despotic elders, went to attend the *kalima* at Yampon and invited Sayon to go to Bukor to perform the *kalima* there as well. Asekou Sayon agreed to their request and told them that in a few days he would be going to Bukor, provided they brought him enough wood and money. The exact amount of money he would ask for I do not know. As for the bringing of wood, it is typical of this kind of religious movement. Wood was needed to keep the fire going during the all-night-long *kalima* and also to build fences around them and around places they were appropriating and in which they were going to build mosques.

A crucial aspect for us to remember, and to which I shall return, is this. While Asekou Sayon was still in Yampon, one of the elders of Bukor is reported to have exhorted the rest of the population with these words: “Asekou Sayon is coming to Bukor. Take care

so on. By joining a *kalima* and reciting the formula in front of witnesses one is ipso facto converted to Islam. However, it is also possible that *kalima* comes from *karamat*, the Arabic word for the thaumaturgic powers of shaykhs and holy men.

about the way you sleep, so that he finds you in a good sleeping position.” This is a *capafo*, and by its very nature a *capafo* has different readings. “Take care about the way you sleep” can be a direct exhortation, since for the Baga it is at night that witches abandon their human bodies and go to celebrate cannibalistic feasts in an invisible realm they call *dabal*, which is also the realm of dreams. To find someone literally sleeping in a strange position may denounce his or her evil dreams. But the virtuosity of speaking in *capafo* is that the message can have different readings, and this one in particular has other meanings, as will be shown.

Asekou Sayon arrived in Bukor in August or September 1956 surrounded by the youths from Yampon singing religious songs. The youth team went back to Yampon a few days later and was replaced by a team of youths of Bukor. This was the pattern in Sayon’s journey: the youth of a given village would go with him to the next village to teach the songs to the local population. A few days or weeks later, they would go back to their own village; this made Sayon’s following huge, on occasions up to five hundred people if not more than that, “all living together at the edge of a village” as an informant put it. To the people who did not want to join the *kalima*, or who were forbidden to join them by their elders or husbands, Sayon’s team did probably look like an unsettling “counter culture,” a group of people living together, and being very active at night. Some Catholics who did not join Sayon believe that the people in the group were having orgies. They probably looked very much like the very gatherings of witches in *dabal* they were supposed to eliminate.

If we take into consideration that the arrival of Asekou Sayon in Bukor happened at the height of the rainy season, when the Baga young people are supposed to spend the whole day in the rice fields, when the consumption of rice is considerably bigger than in any other period of the year and when the rice from the last harvest starts to become scarce, we can understand the difficulty of having to put up with a Muslim preacher who does not only withdraw the most active forces of society, but who furthermore represents a high cost for the village and who nonetheless is difficult or impossible to resist. This became a concern for the representatives of the Baga and other ethnic unions in Conakry and Boké, who complained to the authorities about Sayon (and other *jihadists*) and their exploitation of the population.

But let us remain in the village. In one of the interviews in Bukor itself, an informant told me that when Sayon was still in Yampon and the youth of Bukor went there to ask him to go to their village, one of the elders of Bukor said to his co-habitants: "This man who is now in Yampon will come to Bukor. It is not we who have invited him, it is not the youths who have invited him; it is God who has established that he comes to our village." This is an interesting remark. On the one hand it clarifies that the youths were responsible for Sayon's invitation, even if the elders are not willing to acknowledge such responsibility. On the other hand, it also indicates the ambiguous feelings stimulated by iconoclast movements, since it can be read as though the elders were also willing to accept Sayon's iconoclasm. Jack Goody once argued that people always have an ambivalent attitude towards representation of divine forces (whether a high god or minor spirits), and that that explains how easy it is for iconoclast reformers to convince people to destroy them (Goody 1991). Similarly, Jean-Pierre Dozon has argued that in times of oppression and misfortune, people tend to objectify the causes of their troubles in their "fetishes," whose destruction then becomes synonymous with the creation or restoration of a healthy community (Dozon 1995).

Asekou Sayon stayed in Bukor for about a month, performing the *kalima*, converting people to Islam, clearing the sacred bush, cutting down the big silk-cotton trees, and destroying whatever objects or products were surrendered to him. One of the leading men behind his official invitation and welcome in Bukor was Sékou Amadou Haidara, the imam of the little mosque of the village. Although Amadou Haidara was born in Bukor, his position in the village was in 1956 quite marginal. Despite being born and raised in a mostly Baga Sitem-speaking village, he never learned to speak the Baga language. His father, Bakar Sidi Haidara, a renowned Tijani shaykh, arrived in Bukor from Senegal, where he returned in his last days. Theirs is a family of influential Tijani *sharifs* (that is, descendants of Mohammed). In 1956, the young Sékou Amadou was not only a well-educated Tijani, but also a member of the R.D.A. committee in Bukor. This confluence of religion and politics, although not always as clear as in the case of Haidara, should not surprise us. In many ways, such a confluence was the very *zeitgeist* of the late colonial period, at least in that part of French West Africa where the R.D.A. had the upper hand in local politics.

When I interviewed Haidara in 1994, he explained to me that he had invited Sayon to Bukor because the latter was, like himself, a Tijani and because he (Haidara) was horrified to live among so many “pagan” people. He also drew my attention to the fact that in those days the Baga of Mare and Katako (in Boké *Cercle*) were incorporating in their villages the Jakhanke, a Mande-speaking religious community who were introducing the Quadiriyya brotherhood as well as groundnut farming and trading. The possible contest between the two brotherhoods to control local Muslim policies and to reconstruct pre-colonial trade networks is yet another theme to be explored, not only among the Baga but along the whole of the Guinean coast. But it is also an aspect beyond the scope of my research, at least at this stage.

In any case, the truth may be very different from what Haidara told me. Asekou Sayon strongly denied in my interviews to belong to any particular Sufi brotherhood. Besides, other Tijani imams of the region expressed a strong opposition to Sayon. The late Aboubacar Yuuf, imam of the small hamlet of Yenguissa (attached to Mare), probably the most visited Senegalese Tijani in the Baga region until his death in 1996, explained to me that he thought Sayon was nothing but a “thief.” He insisted that the *jihad* Asekou Sayon and his disciples were conducting among the Baga was contrary to the spirit of the Koran and that, accordingly, he prohibited their entry into his hamlet. In Bintimodia, where Asekou Sayon stayed for a period of three weeks or so, the imam was appalled by the fact that Sayon “did not even know how to perform the basic prayers,” according to a Malinke informant of that village.

I think that Sékou Amadou invited Asekou Sayon to Bukor not because he was a Tijani but because he would do what Amadou’s teachings by themselves had not achieved: to end all that “paganism,” the sacrifices to the silk-cotton trees, the initiations in sacred bushes, the “fetishes,” masks and sorcery, all that frenetic palm wine drinking, and with the hegemony of Baga chiefs and elders over Susu-speaking strangers like himself.

Most of the discussions I had with Baga people concerning Asekou Sayon’s passage in Bukor inevitably revolved around the issue of whether he had destroyed *amanco ngopon* or not. Some elders of Bukor recall the first encounter between them and Sayon

in the following anecdotal terms. As soon as Sayon arrived in Bukor, according to them, he asked the population to bring *amanco ngopon* to him. In a rather apologetic manner, they answered that this would not be possible, as *amanco ngopon* is not a thing that can be carried from one place to another, but rather a being with his own will, who comes to the village whenever *he* wants and not whenever *they* want. According to these informants, Sayon believed them, forgot about *amanco ngopon* and dedicated his energies to destroying other minor objects, although this is by no means how Sayon himself presents things, as we will see.

Sayon and Amadou marked the spot where the villagers were to build the big mosque of Bukor. The spot was precisely the place where the performance of *amanco ngopon* used to take place. This appropriation of sacred spaces is typical of the movement, and probably of religious expansion elsewhere in the world. In Minar, where the *jiḥād* was conducted by Sayon's disciple Asekou Abdoulaye, the mosque was built over the recently cleared sacred bush. In Kufen we get the same pattern, as well as in Tolkoc. In the Baga Fore village of Monchon, people constructed a school over the cleared sacred bush. Nowhere could the reversal from a space reserved for secret Baga initiations to one dedicated to national public education be more paradigmatic than in this case. I will comment later on this appropriation of spaces previously consecrated to *amanco ngopon* or to other spirits.

Shortly after Sayon left Bukor, one of the Catholic missionaries of Katako visited the village and was surprised to see the results of Sayon's passage. Let me quote what he wrote:

The great silk-cotton trees of Bigori [Bukor] have been cut down by the *karamoko*³. In certain places the sacred bush (!) has been cleared. The damage is bigger than I had first thought. Another result: In the middle of the village, a place surrounded by wooden sticks has become the place of prayer of the new converts to Islam. It is still difficult for us to make up our minds about this movement, which in order to achieve its current breadth can only be inspired by a political party [It is made clear in other parts of the journal that he is talking of

³*Karamoko* (from *karan*, to learn, and *moxo*, man) is a Mande word meaning "teacher." Although it normally means Koranic teacher, in Guinea it is also used sometimes to refer to Catholic catechists.

the R.D.A.]. As for us, we have “retrieved” some people; we must take advantage of the ambience. Yet, there is room to be a bit worried, because people walk like sheep and we may have difficulties in the future (...).⁴

According to some informants, Sayon left Bukor and went to Kufen, which would have been the first village of the *Cercle* of Boké visited by him. Other informants claimed he went to Mankountan and then to Kalikse, and that Kufen was in fact visited by another Asekou, Abdoulaye Camara (see below). Be that as it may, in Kufen Asekou cleared the sacred bush and started the building of the mosque over it. Luckily for us, a few days before the arrival of Asekou, Kufen had been visited by the Deputy Commandant of Boké. It seems that the *jihad* had been denounced by a certain Robert Thomas, President of the *Union des Bagas Sitémous* (U.B.S.) in Conakry. Robert Thomas had complained to the French Administration about the “destruction of the Baga custom” by a Sékou Bokary Kuréssi, from Kindia, according to the written report⁵. The French Administration sent F. Calisti, Deputy Commandant of Boké, in search of the villagers’ opinion. The main objective of his visit, according to the documentation, was to find out whether the Islamisation respected freedom of belief, in which case the French would have nothing to say. But it is clear that they also wanted to know whether this *jihadist* was impelling people not to pay taxes to chiefs, a common strategy used by R.D.A. agitators to de-legitimize that oppressive institution⁶. Here is what the population told him:

We know that the *marabout*⁷ is now in M’bottini [Mbotin] and that he is

⁴*Mission de Katakò. Cahier de tournées, 6 December 1956. Archives des PP. Du St.-Esprit, Box 297; my translation.*

⁵Sékou Boubacar Kouressi, a name both Asekou Sayon and his disciple Asekou Abdoulaye would use during their *jihad*, was in fact the name of their master, who was based in Kindia and who, to the best of my knowledge, did not go to the *Bagatai* in person. See below.

⁶Although at that time it seems that the Baga were reluctant to pay taxes, the strategy normally followed to de-legitimise the chiefs was not so much focused on not paying taxes as it was on using channels other than the chief (such as R.D.A.’s committees) to make the taxes reach the *commandant de cercle*.

⁷*Marabout* was an imprecise term used in French to refer either to Muslim charismatic leaders (as in this case), or to Muslims in general. Its cognate *grand marabout* was used to refer to immensely popular shaykhs upon whom French relied to keep the population under control. Scholars tend not to use these concepts other than in colonial historiography.

working towards the demolition of the power of sorcerers. We fully agree with him on this point. Here in Kouffin [Kufen], like elsewhere, we have our sorcerers who in the past have never hesitated to use their artefacts and their poisons to kill those among us who attempted to fight them. The youths of the village have not been dancing for more than a year now; they cannot even play the flute because the *féticheurs* have forbidden it. We know this Robert Thomas, he is from Kouffin. We know that around ten years ago he abandoned the village and fled to Conakry because he had had problems with our *féticheurs*. We know that he went to M'bottini and tried to chase the *marabout*, and that the population over there threatened to do him harm if he did not leave immediately. We do not understand why he is now defending the *féticheurs*; here in Kufen we have all agreed to ask the *marabout* to come to our village as soon as he will have finished in M'bottini.⁸ (My translation).

The President of the U.B.S. had to withdraw his complaint, not without saying, according to the report by Calisti, that "the Baga will later regret having abandoned their custom." Whether or not they did or do regret it will be our concern in a later section of this thesis.

Calisti then went to Mbotin to meet the *marabout*⁹. This person told him that he was in Mbotin because the population had asked him to come, and that he was forcing no one to convert to Islam. He was there only to fight "fetishism" and to remain at the disposal of those who would want to know more about the Koran. He also clarified that he was not urging the population not to pay taxes. He even asked the commandant to give him a letter in order to support his actions (which Calisti did not do), which might testify to a cunning skill of Asekou to obtain support from as many fronts as he possibly could. And it worked, for although he did not obtain any letter from Commandant Calisti, the latter went back to Boké fully satisfied, and without any further worry about the Islamisation of the Baga. Not, that is, until a few months later.

After Bukor, Kufen (probably), Kalikse and Bintimodia, Asekou Sayon travelled to

⁸F. Calisti, *Rapport de tournée*. Oct. 22, 1956. 4 pages. CB 11.

⁹I suspect he met Abdoulaye Camara, since it is he who did the *jihad* in Mbotin. Yet, it could as well be that Sayon was at that precise moment in Mbotin, since they used to visit each other. It is also possible they met in Kufen, the only village for which I could not clarify whether the *jihad* had been conducted by one or by the other.

Mare and Katako. He sent one of his *talibs*¹⁰ to Katako and went personally to Mare. According to missionary records, his *talibé* and his followers arrived in Katako on February 14, 1957, being received by the R.D.A. committee based in the *abanka* of *Taitagui*. It is interesting that it was the people of *Taitagui* who first housed the R.D.A. and Sayon, since *Taitagui* has always been in great tension with *Kansomble*, the *abanka* of the canton chiefs.

In Mare, Sayon encountered serious problems with the Catholic population. Mare is quite a close village to Katako, and the missionaries and catechists (and Christians in general) were quite ready to face him. The village was divided in two halves, the Christian population living together around the small Catholic mission, and the followers of Sayon living in their own space, just adjacent.

When Father Kerloc'h, Superior of the Mission of Katako, went to see Sayon in Mare and complained that his all-night-long *lailas*¹¹ were making people sleepless and tired during the day, and hence boys and girls not attending school, Sayon replied: "Close your school if you wish! The sorcerers do their evil by night; it is by night that they must be caught."¹² He then threatened the whole village with a malediction if the Christians did not help him clear the sacred bush, although in his characteristic syncretistic way, he allowed them to attend church first and clear the forest later.

After staying in Mare for a month, Sayon went to join his team in Katako. The attitudes of the big Catholic community in Katako were ambiguous. On the one hand, many of them were complaining that the all-night long *kalimas* were making it difficult for people to sleep and making the boys and girls tired. On the other hand, many Catholics were feeling more and more compelled to join the *kalimas* because otherwise they

¹⁰*Talib, talibe, talibé* or *talibi* are terms used in West Africa to designate a koranic student or a disciple of a shaykh. Although in Guinea most people say *talibé*, I will here use "*talib*," as this seems to be the most correct form, and is the one given in Robinson and Triaud's Islamic glossary (Robinson and Triaud 1997:579). Harrison (1988), however, uses *talibé*. I will simply add an "s" at the end in order to construct the plural (*talibs*).

¹¹"*Lailas*," "*lailalas*," or similar terms were the derogatory terms used by Catholics to refer to Sayon's ceremonies, given the continuous repetition of the *kalima* formula they consisted of.

¹²This exchange took place in Mare on February 24, 1957, as recorded in the *Journal Katako*.

risked being accused of being evil doers. Besides, many Catholics thought it was a good idea to clear the sacred bushes and get rid of the fetishes, and followed Sayon without necessarily converting to Islam. When Sayon arrived, after a month of *kalimas* by his *talib*, he found a huge team ready to clear the sacred bushes.

The very day of his arrival in Katako, Sayon and his followers went to *Kansomble* and cleared the sacred bush although, as the missionaries took care to note, people were disappointed not to find *amanco ngopon* there. They also went to the *kulo kupon* of the Keita people, a lineage responsible for *abol* (*amanco*'s "wife"), and demolished it after the Keita ritual specialists had surrendered the awesome "fetish" to Sayon. Or did they? We will see more about the personal encounter between the Keita and Sayon later.

During the clearing of the sacred bush, a young man of Katako (Guillaume Bangoura, a Christian) was bitten by a poisonous snake. He was taken to Asekou Sayon with the hope that he would heal him. But the boy died and people started to doubt Sayon's powers against evil. Sayon found himself in a very sticky situation. Besides, he tried to pray over Guillaume's body but was severely challenged by the Superior Father of Katako.

According to some informants, it was this event that made Sayon leave Katako, which he did in May 15, 1957. He did not go to the northern Baga villages of Katongoro and Kakilenc, but eastwards, to the Mikhifore villages. Katongoro and Kakilenc were the only two villages where neither Sayon nor any of his *talib* entered, mainly because the Catholic population there was at the time huge and they mounted a very strong resistance to those who wanted to invite Sayon. Gaspard Camara, the first Christian village chief in Katongoro (and the first non-Touré chief since his father's brother Youssuf Camara had briefly been chief before 1920) promised the missionaries he would not "sign any paper authorising [Sayon] to enter the village."¹³

After a few months of conducting the *jihad* among the Mikhifore, Asekou Sayon ran into very serious problems when an old man died after being wounded by Asekou

¹³*Cahiers de tournées*, 19-22 January 1957; my translation.

Sayon's furious followers, who accused him of being a sorcerer and beat him up. The tragic episode was reported to the French authorities of Boké, and Asekou Sayon's activities were put to an end. He was tried and condemned to prison. He was only freed when President Sékou Touré declared a general amnesty at the onset of independence, in autumn 1958.

I have briefly mentioned before that there was another Asekou conducting a *jihad* parallel to that of Sayon. His name was Abdoulaye Camara (a Susu from the region of Boffa), and he was sometimes described to me as a *talib* of Asekou Sayon and some other times as a co-*talib* of their common master. While Asekou Sayon was visiting the Baga villages of Bukor, Kufen, Kalikse, Bintimodia, Mare and Katako, Asekou Abdoulaye was doing the same in the villages of the west, those deeper in the mangroves: Minar, Mbotin, Tolkoc, Kamsar and Kawass. The passages of the two Asekou are difficult to differentiate because Asekou Abdoulaye used the name of his master Sayon and they both used the name of their master Shaykh Kuressi (see below), known in the region of coastal Guinea as Sékou Boubacar. In addition they sometimes used the name of Fanta Moudou (the *wali* of Kankan, with whom they wanted to be associated)¹⁴. These chains of identification of students with masters may correspond to Islamic notions of learning, but in Africa they are also to be found in Christian-oriented religious movements. In the regions of Côte d'Ivoire most affected by Harrisism, apparently, it is not so easy to know whether a village was visited by the prophet Harris or by one of his disciples using his name (Dozon 1995).

After having been in Minar Mbotin, Kufen (probably), Tolkoc, and Kamsar, Asekou Abdoulaye encountered serious troubles in the village of Kawass, where the Christian population was quite well organised and ready to face any Muslim trouble-maker. When Abdoulaye reached Kawass, he and his followers burnt the house of the chief of the village and beat up an old man whose sons were Christian. One of these sons, S.C., whom I interviewed, did not hesitate: he went to Boké and reported the violence against his father and other offences to the authorities. The gendarmes came to the village and

¹⁴ For instance, Théodore Camara recalls the passage of Fanta Moudou in his village of Bukor, where the *jihad* was undoubtedly conducted by Sayon (Camara 1966:48).

took Abdoulaye with them to Boké. A few weeks later, his master Sayon would join him, accused, as we have seen, of being involved in a murder. I could never clarify in what precise months the two men were stopped. Considering Sayon visited five or six Mikhifore villages after leaving Katako in May 1957, and considering he normally stayed one month in a village (although in Katako they stayed for more than three), we can reckon he was stopped at the end of 1957 or beginning of 1958. The date could not have been more symbolic, since December 31, 1957 is the date of the official abolition of the institution of customary chieftaincy. The imprisonment of Asekou Sayon was not only the end of his *jihad* but also the end of a whole period of the history of Guinea. Or, as a nationalist would say, the onset of the modern history of the country.

Precisely in order to contextualize the religious movement of Sayon in the broader Guinean political and historical framework, we must leave now the *Bagatai* and go to the Muslim Mande regions of the east, where it all started.

5.3 Asekou Sayon: the *marabout* who came from the east

Asekou Sayon Kerra¹⁵ was born in Passaya, a Malinke village in today's Prefecture of Faranah. "Sayon" is a name given to any child born after twins. Among the Malinke and other West African groups, it is normally believed that such a person has supernatural powers. "Asekou" is an idiosyncratic transformation of Sékou, the Mande equivalent of shaykh. I do not know when he began to be called by this title, nor why it was "Asekou" and not the common "Sékou."

When I met him, Asekou Sayon introduced himself, first and foremost, as a *talib* of Shaykh Bakary Kuressi, also known in Guinea as Sékou Boubacar Gouressi¹⁶. According to Sayon, the latter was a *talib* of Shaykh Fanta Mohammed Sheriff of Kankan (Fanta Moudou), although this may not be true; it was probably a way for Sayon to place his master, and therefore himself, under the umbrella of the venerated

¹⁵ Kerra is a common Malinke family name. It is also spelt Keira, Keïra or Kera.

¹⁶ Other names are Shaykh Kourris (the one he had on his personal stamp when he was a Koranic instructor in Kindia), and Shaykh Aboubacar.

wali of Kankan. In the 1940s and 1950s Fanta Moudou was one of the most respected holy men in West Africa, equally respected by the French and by independentist leaders such as Sékou Touré and Kwame Nkrumah. He was instrumental in the making of Guinea. Not only was he the godfather and the homonym of President Ahmed Sékou Touré but he was also the son of Shaykh Sidiki, who had been the spiritual advisor of Samori Touré. Samori was a Malinke leader who created the empire of Wasalou and who was defeated by the French in 1898; in the 1950s he was a model to follow by Sékou Touré in his making of the Guinean nation (which could be interpreted as the restoration of Samori's Empire)¹⁷.

Sayon claimed to be seventy-six years old in 1994. This would mean that he was born in 1918, a date which is congruent with details of his life-story and with his consistent way of referring to Sékou Touré as his "younger brother." (According to most of his biographers, Sékou Touré was born between 1920 and 1922, also in the region of Faranah.) His education consisted of a ten-year Koranic training by his father's brother Fode Amadou Kerra in Passaya and later by Shaykh Kuressi, who specifically trained him for the *jihad*. "They chose me to do the *jihad*," he said. Maybe we can interpret these words as an indication that both Kuressi and Amadou concluded that he was not suited for in-depth Koranic study and that his strength and his supernatural powers would be better used for the more practical aspects of Muslim proselytism. Sayon himself acknowledged that he was not as versed in the interpretation of the Koran as Shaykh Kuressi was. According to some informants, his Koranic knowledge was extraordinarily limited.

We do not have much information about Shaykh Kuressi. According to Asekou Sayon, Kuressi was a very popular marabout who had had thousands of followers in the 1940s and early 1950s. Sayon did not know where Kuressi had come from, but this should not surprise us. My experience is that Islamic students do not normally ask their masters

¹⁷Contrary to what one still finds today in many books on African history, Sékou Touré was neither the grandson nor the grandnephew of Samori. This rumour is a particular aspect of Sékou Touré's skills in inventing a Guinean national tradition and a glorified personal biography that dies hard. The only connection between Samori and Sékou was that they were both Malinke, they both wanted to create a big country, and they both wanted to expel the French from their territories.

where they come from: some of the imams I interviewed on the coast did not know Sayon's ethnic group or birth region, let alone his family name, even if they had been his *talib*. All Sayon knew was that Shaykh Kuressi came from the east, and insisted upon his links with Kankan, and especially with Fanta Moudou.

So far, the only precise written information about Kuressi I am aware of are Issiaga Sylla's dissertation (Sylla 1984) and Lansine Kaba's book on the Wahhabiya (Kaba 1974). Despite the fact that Sylla mixes up Kuressi with his *talib* and the image one gets is very confusing, his dissertation does provide useful insights. He suggests a Malian origin for Kuressi. Lansine Kaba gives some more detailed information. According to him, Kuressi was a Sarakolle *grand marabout* who, up to the mid 1940s, was based in Bamako. He was visited by people from all over the French territory in search of Koranic instruction and spiritual guidance or advice (Kaba 1974: 89-90). Kaba insists that, like many other *grands marabouts*, Kuressi was not only well versed in the interpretation of the Koran but also in Sufi mysticism and divination. The number of his *talib* was superior to other *grand marabouts* of the region (Kaba 1974:90), but his capacity to mobilise people, as that of other *grands marabouts*, did not concern the colonial authorities, at least not while he was in Bamako.

But the mid-1940s were bad times for Kuressi and other *grands marabouts*, even if, or precisely because, they were supported by the French administration. These *marabouts*, who relied too much on African non-Koranic practices and on Sufi mystic beliefs, and who were close to the French powers, were attacked by the Wahhabist reformers who settled in Bamako from 1945 onwards. The main target of these reformers was to purify Islam according to the Wahhab doctrine that they had learnt in Egypt, as well as to use Islam as an anti-colonial discourse, something they had also learnt in Nasser's Egypt. *Maraboutism* and sufism became their strongest enemies, both for religious and for political reasons, if indeed the two spheres could be differentiated in their agenda.¹⁸

Although we do not have any details about his life, there is room to presume that under

¹⁸For the fights between Wahhab reformers and followers of African Shaykhs in Bamako under French rule, it is useful to compare Kaba's sympathetic views of the Wahhabaiya attitude (Kaba 1974) with Brenner's vindication of sub-Saharan Sufism (Brenner 1984).

the Wahhabist pressure in Bamako, Kuressi left and went eastwards, towards Kankan. Kankan was a major Muslim town in West Africa, to the point that, according to Kaba, the first Wahhabist leaders had thought of it as their most appropriate West African base. If they chose Bamako instead it was due, among other reasons, to the fact that Kankan was the headquarters of Fanta Moudou, too respected and venerated a *wali* for the Wahhabists to have a confrontation.

It is worth noting that, according to Sayon, Kuressi disappeared for three years before reappearing in Kankan. Whatever the reasons for his disappearance, his reappearance in Kankan was interpreted, Sayon told me, as a miracle, and his popularity increased enormously. Not too surprisingly, this characteristic pattern of concealment and reappearance gave rise to a *mahdist* belief, and French authorities became very nervous about it. It was one thing to be a popular *grand marabout* and another one to be taken as a *mahdi* who, by definition, would stimulate anti-French feelings. Sayon recalled that the French authorities went to see Fanta Moudou and asked him whether it was true, as people said, that Kuressi was the *mahdi*. Fanta Moudou, whose diplomacy and wisdom have become proverbial in Guinea, answered them :“Bring me everybody in the world in front of me and I will tell you who is the *mahdi*,” which, according to Sayon’s interpretation, meant that it is impossible to say who the *mahdi* is. With his wise words, apparently, Fanta Moudou calmed down both the enthusiasm of the population and the fears of the colonial administration, and Kuressi did not get into any trouble, or so Sayon claimed.

Sayon was careful to note that Kuressi never considered himself a liberator from the French. He would rather say such things as (I am quoting Sayon): “My name is Sékou Boubacar. Another Sékou will come after me. I am here to help you get rid of the ‘fetishes’; the other one will come to help you get rid of the French.” Whether or not he was referring to Sékou Touré is not clear, not even to Sayon, but the phrase encapsulates the intimate connection between Islam and anticolonial politics, as well as the connection between anti-fetishist practices and the building of independent Guinea. Apart from these specific words, that there was a personal link between Kuressi and Touré (as well as between them and Fanta Moudou) was insisted on by Sayon: “They knew each other very well, but I do not know what sort of pact they had signed.”

When I first met him, Asekou Sayon provided me a very long, almost incredible, narrative describing all the villages he had done his *jihad* in. This narrative is difficult to double-check, and he often got the dates wrong. Besides, he obviously used his name to appropriate the actions of his *talib*, and probably those of his master too. The most difficult thing for me to believe was that Sayon claimed that his long journey (the one starting in Faranah and finishing in the court of Boké) took him thirty years to accomplish. This is inconsistent not only with the date of arrival of Kuressi in Guinea but also with the age Sayon himself claims to be, which would mean he was in his late thirties when he was stopped in Boké. I personally think that ten years would be a much more realistic figure. I figure he started his *jihad* in the late 1940s, when he met Shaykh Kuressi in the region of Faranah, or somewhere between Faranah and Kankan. Sayon would have then been in his late 1920s or early 1930s.

According to the narrative he gave me, after conducting the *jihad* in Faranah he went towards Sitakoto, on the border of Guinea with Sierra Leone, and then onto “the English country” (the colony of Sierra Leone). Why he went to Sierra Leone is not clear. While he says he only went to a village if it had invited him, there is also room to presume that problems in Guinea forced him leave French territory and go to Sierra Leone, if it is true that he went there at all.¹⁹

In Sierra Leone, he conducted the *jihad* among the Limba who, according to him, were the hardest people to convert in his entire *jihad*, and then against the Loko. He then went to Kambia, Karna (a Malinke village), Loko-Madina, Bendemu, Mayata, Makieni, Kamakuye, Fintoya, and then to Madina-Oula, that is, again into Guinea.

From Madina-Oula he started for the first time to “destroy the Susu fetishes (*seri*).” He visited the villages of Khokuya (in Mamou), Tamsou (in Kindia), Baré, Sangoya,

¹⁹According to French historian Michel Brot, the border region of Faranah/Sierra Leone was particularly agitated by Hamalist (Tijani) reformers in the mid 1940s, some of them also called Sayon, but not Kerra (Brot, p.c.). Already in the 1930s a Muslim reformer of unclear origin, Haidara, had conducted a *jihad* starting in Guinea and going to the same regions in Sierra Leone that Sayon claimed to have visited (Brot 1994:134-160). There is reason to suspect that Sayon was appropriating someone else’s actions in his own narrative.

Segima, Baren Khatiya, Kindia, and then went down to the coast, to Kalum.

I do not know whether Kuressi was with him during all this journey or whether his trajectory from Kankan to the coast was a different one. On one occasion Sayon told me that Kuressi and he did the *jihad* together and that their tasks were different:

I did the first part, the superficial one: I got rid of the “fetishes.” Then he would come and do the more important one: the explanation of the Muslim doctrine. He also had the power to destroy, but was not as dangerous and courageous as I was. I was much younger and stronger than he was. When a village had need of Boubacar, he would send me before him.

But he also told me that when they reached the coast, they trained Asekou Abdoulaye and Kuressi did not continue with them, as though the Kuressi-Sayon duo was now to be replaced by the Sayon-Abdoulaye one. Kuressi stayed permanently in Kindia, some 130 kms. in the hinterland from Conakry.

In Souguéta, a village of Kindia, Kuressi opened a *medersa* (Koranic school). From Souguéta either he or his *talibs* would do the *jihad* against the populations of the coast, including the islands of Loss, in front of Conakry, where according to Sayon the *jihad* was conducted by Kuressi himself. It must be taken into account that all these coastal areas, from Conakry to the border between Guinea and Guinea Bissau, were then mostly inhabited by non-Muslim peoples (Baga, Nalu, Landuma, Capi, Beafada, etc).

Sayon claimed to have been in Kalum Peninsula conducting the *jihad* in the villages of Camayene, Koleh, Gbessia, and Kaporo, today wards of Conakry. In Kaporo a crocodile had killed a woman and the population, convinced that the crocodile was in fact a sorcerer, asked Asekou Sayon to exorcise it. This exorcism made him particularly famous on the coast.

In February 1956, Kuressi wrote a certificate for Sayon (Fig. 4) in which we can read:

I, Cheik Gouressi, based in Souguéta, acknowledge Asekou Sayon Kerra as one of my *talibs*. He is authorised to take to the authorities whomever he will find in the cantons acting in my name without a certificate. (My translation).

How many *talibs* were doing the *jihād* with Kuressi's approval I do not know. Nor do I know how many people were doing it without his approval or certificate. What is clear is that in the late 1950s, and only in the region of Boké, there were several *jihādists*. We know of Sayon and his disciple Abdoulaye among the Baga, we read of a Sékouna Bayo who conducted a similar *jihād* among the Beafada on the right bank of the Rio Nuñez (Gaillard 1994). We are told that the Nalu had their own (Marie Yvonne Curtis, p.c.), and Asekou Sayon told us that he had other *talibs* apart from Abdoulaye, like the one he sent to Katako while he was in Mare. Almost all the villages in Boké were visited by one or another Muslim *jihād*ist in the late fifties including, according to witnesses, Boké city itself. Whether all these *jihādists* were interconnected and linked to Kuressi's headquarters in Souguéta is difficult to tell. Nothing can be said until research has been conducted on the Souguéta *medersa* itself.

In any case, the proliferation of Muslim iconoclasm in a region previously famous for housing so many "pagan" groups deserves special attention, especially given the political developments of the time. People (and by "people" I mean informants, intellectuals and researchers) normally make a straightforward cause-effect connection between the actions of the *jihādists* and the agenda of Sékou Touré. Hence, according to dozens of my informants, Sayon was "sent" by Touré to destroy the Baga because Touré was afraid of their "secret power" (to use their own terms). One informant put it in a very revealing way: "Only later did we understand that Sayon had been sent by Sékou Touré." I for one do not think that Touré was personally involved in sending iconoclast preachers on tour. In fact, from the little knowledge I have of Touré's pre-independence ideas, I suspect that he was closer to Wahhabist ideals than to this kind of *maraboutage*. Yet, I think (and I shall come back to it) that there is a relationship, more complicated than a direct personal link, between the Guinea that Sékou Touré was politically fighting for and the destruction of the "fetishes" that the *jihādists* were conducting. The R.D.A. local committees were on many occasions the link between the two spheres, but not the intermediaries between them. It is my contention that they were using the *jihādists* in the same measure as the *jihādists* were using the R.D.A.'s existence and infrastructure.

To clarify the Sayon-Touré connection in the interviews with Sayon was particularly difficult. He told me that before setting out towards Boffa and Boké, Shaykh Kuressi advised him to get hold of a P.D.G. card. Sayon went to Conakry and met Sékou Touré, but for reasons that were not clear in my interview, he did not obtain any card and decided to continue, trusting that Kuressi's certificate would be enough to conduct his *jihad*. Not being officially affiliated to the P.D.G. was going to prove yet more problematic than he had first thought, especially once he was arrested in Boké and the R.D.A. withdrew its support.

The last episodes of Sayon's long *jihad* are, in his version, rather different from the accounts gathered elsewhere. He never mentioned any violent episode, let alone any murder. According to him, he was in Konkofi (a Mikhifore village) when he was summoned for a meeting of the R.D.A. in Boké. Apparently, during his *jihad* in the *cercle* of Boké, he was frequently visited by a certain Moustafa, a Malinke candidate of the *Bloc Africain de Guinée* (B.A.G.), a conservative party opposed to the P.D.G.-R.D.A. Moustafa probably went to visit Sayon to get some spiritual advice or some talismans to help him fulfil his political ambitions, a help that Sayon, since he was a freelance *marabout*, probably provided. Sayon claims that the R.D.A. authorities in Boké accused him of supporting Moustafa and the B.A.G., and that this is why they sent him to prison. Needless to say, this cannot be true. If he was sent to prison, he had to have done something that French criminal law viewed as punishable, something other than supporting the wrong political candidate. According to Adolphe Kande Camara, he was accused of swindling, but again that does not seem strong enough an accusation in 1957 or 1958.

It must be taken into account that the R.D.A. and the B.A.G. were severely opposed. In 1956 and 1957 the struggles between the two were deadly violent, especially on the coast. While the main objective of the P.D.G. was the abolition of the chieftaincies, the B.A.G. supported this institution. While the R.D.A. was pan-African and strongly anti-ethnic, the B.A.G. was born out of the fusion of several ethnic unions. Sayon was normally invited by R.D.A. committees and in many villages he and his followers set fire to the chief's house, but in some villages he made friends with the chief. In the Baga Fore village of Monchon (Boffa) he was invited by the canton chief, a Susu man

(*Almami* Salifou), and married his daughter. But then again, *Almami* Salifou was a Susu in a Baga village. Here again the pattern strangers vs. Baga obtains and seems to prevail over the R.D.A. vs. chieftaincy one.

The episode is not clear, but whatever the case, the reasons behind his detention may have been multiple. In the first place, the murder we know about. In the second place, there is the probability that Asekou Abdoulaye (who had been arrested a few days before Sayon) may have mentioned the name of his master in his interrogation. In the third place, there is the fact that the elites living in Conakry were not all that happy about what was going on up in the villages. They argued to the authorities that these two men were exploiting the local population.

At a more speculative level, one can suspect that the feelings of R.D.A. leaders towards these *jihadists* acting in Boké must have been very ambivalent. On the one hand, the *jihadists* were instrumental in bringing the youth together for the building of mosques, the burning of chiefs' houses, the de-legitimation of local powers, and so on. On the other hand, however, they represented an Islam that the R.D.A. of Boké did not want to endorse. Once their "mission" was accomplished (and their mission was accomplished when they were stopped), it became apparent that there was no need of them.

Whatever the case, Sayon and Abdoulaye got out of prison at the end of 1958 to find an independent Guinea that had no use for them. The "times of the *grands marabouts*," as Jean-Louis Triaud has recently written, had finished with colonialism (Triaud 1997a). It was the onset of the time of big politicians. If the triad Shaykh Kuressi, Asekou Sayon and Asekou Abdoulaye (and many others) had been able to thrive in the earlier period, they never knew how to adapt to the latter. The way of living that had supported them in the 1950s was no longer viable after September 1958. They have lived ever since in a poor and forgotten state. Kuressi and Abdoulaye died in the 1980s. Sayon was still alive, together with his four wives, in a Susu village not far from Conakry when I met him in 1994.

5.4. The passage among the Baga Sitem revisited

The conversations with Sayon provided new insights into his *jihad*, very different sometimes from the ones gathered in the villages where he undertook it. Sayon always insisted that he never used violence to enter a village; he was always invited. He would never use violence to force people to join his *kalima*, although he did admit to beating “sorcerers.” Whether he beat them or not, what seems to be particularly important is that his final objective was to make them confess.

My conversations with Sayon were particularly interesting concerning his passage in Bukor, the village where we started this chapter. Sayon claims that the first thing he did in Bukor was to go to the sacred bush, forbidden to non-initiated people, and go in and out of it several times. People were astonished because they thought that nobody could go into the bush and return alive. He then invited the youth of the village to do the same thing and enter the sacred bush. This was a profanation of the sacred space, an appropriation of the power that belonged to the highest strata of elders. Once the space was de-sacralized, he would start his destructive action, particularly the destruction of *amanco ngopon* and the beating up of the ritual elders responsible for it. Sayon revealed some information about *amanco ngopon* that the Baga would have never told me, such as the fact that inside the big construction of *amanco ngopon* there were seven men hidden one on top of the other, and that each man was from a different lineage of the village. The Baga were later surprised I had learned that, and the detail was double-checked and proved true.²⁰

We have already seen that, according to the villagers’ account, when Sayon arrived in Bukor he immediately asked people to bring him *amanco ngopon*, to which they replied that *amanco ngopon* was not a thing that could be carried about. It is possible that this exchange between some Baga and Sayon took place. It could be just a metaphorical way for the Baga to tell me that they were clever enough not to let Asekou Sayon get away with his destructive intentions. Asekou Sayon explains things in a

²⁰ Contrary to what my oldest Baga informants tended to claim (they often presented themselves as having fooled Sayon), Asekou Sayon did obtain quite a lot of information about Baga ritual structures from the confessions of the elders.

completely different way. He acknowledges that he was after *amanco ngopon*, of which he had heard long before arriving in the Baga region, but he also claims to have destroyed it. According to his description, inside the sacred bush there was a hut surrounded by human skulls and guarded by some very old men with long beards. It was inside this hut that *amanco ngopon*'s head was kept.

Sayon gave orders to some of his followers to burn the head, which they did (or so he was led to believe, as the burning did not take place in his presence). In the village, he entered the *kilo kipon* of different lineages and took out many of their objects, including the rest of *amanco ngopon* (*amanco ngopon* had three parts, once described to me as the head, the body and the feet, each one of them being the responsibility of a particular lineage and therefore kept in a different *wolo wopon*). "When I did that" Sayon recalled with a tone of victory, "people said that the *Baga fe* (in Susu: "Baga things", i.e.: Baga culture) were finished."

It is worth emphasising this identification implicit in Sayon's words between *amanco ngopon* and Baganess. Asekou Sayon clearly states that he destroyed the "Baga things" by destroying *amanco ngopon*. But Baga people most strongly sustain the opposite view: that Sayon could not have destroyed *amanco ngopon* and that he certainly did not.

In fact, Sayon frankly acknowledged to me that the head of *amanco ngopon* was not burnt by him personally, but by his followers, who afterwards showed the ashes to him. But what ashes? Sayon seems to be convinced that his followers were faithful to him and that he had converted them into his particular way of seeing things. But many of the youngsters who followed him did so reluctantly and with fear. On the one hand, they were eager for a change and for getting rid of sorcery, elders' abuses, and many other things, but on the other hand they could not stop believing in the power of such spirits as *amanco ngopon*. In my view, rather than a complete destruction, what they really wanted was a compromise.

Let me develop this crucial point. We have seen that while Asekou Sayon was still in Yampon, an old man from Bukor who had been spying on him told the villagers:

“Asekou Sayon will come to Bukor, take care about the way you sleep, so that he finds you in a good sleeping position.” The first time I was told this *capafō*, as I have already said, my understanding of it was rather literal, as an invitation to abandon certain Baga practices and beliefs. Yet, the *capafō* has other readings; an alternative interpretation was given to me by the very person who had told it to me in the first place, but only a year later (and only once he knew I had another version of the events provided by Sayon himself). According to him, what the old man had meant was that the Baga elders had to pretend to be sleeping while in fact being well awake; in other words, they would have to pretend to follow Sayon while still keeping their secrets.

In Mare, I had a similar experience. The first time I gathered a narrative about Sayon’s passage there, I was told: “Asekou Sayon did not do any harm to us because he found that we were sitting properly.” In an identical pattern to that of Bukor, I was told that while Sayon was in Kalikse (the Baga Sitem village he was staying in before entering Mare) an old man went to spy on him and came back to Mare advising people “to sit properly.” Only months later I was told that “to sit properly” meant to be prepared not to let Sayon and the youths following him get away with their plans. In this village I got an interesting account by an elder (a young man in 1956) who told me that they (and he meant those who did follow Sayon) did not want to get rid of *amanco ngopon* and the other spiritual objects. “What we liked about Sayon,” he said, “is that he was going to help us cut down the sacred bush so that we could plant fruit trees instead.” This is a very interesting remark on which I will comment later in this chapter.

In Katako an even-clearer case of reluctance to follow Sayon obtains. In this village, the head of the *Jeunesse Agricole Catholique*, a Keita, wrote a letter to the Catholic missionaries in September 1956 (when Sayon was about to leave Bukor and enter the *Cercle* of Boké) asking them to go to the French authorities so that Sayon’s entrance to the *Canton Baga* would be forbidden. Needless to say, the French authorities did not do anything, and Asekou Sayon entered the *Cercle* of Boké and in six months he reached Katako itself. But six months is a long time to learn to sit, to use the Baga expression. As in many other Baga villages, the Keita lineage in Katako is in charge of *abol*, the female spirit we have discussed elsewhere. Sayon, who knew it, immediately asked them to surrender *abol*. The Keita people accepted, but instead of *abol*, they gave

Sayon an ordinary piece of wood, slightly similar in shape to the real thing. Sayon and his followers happily burnt the object, probably thinking he was, once again, destroying Baga culture when he was instead just burning a piece of wood. Two questions may come to mind. First, what ever happened to the real *abol*, the one Sayon did not burn? Second, why did other people not reveal that the Keita were fooling Sayon?

The answer to the first question is that the real *abol*, like so many other objects that Sayon did not take, was probably put somewhere safe. The answer to the second question is twofold. I think that people did not reveal that the Keita were fooling Sayon because, on the one hand, they were afraid of later punishments. On the other hand, because those who followed Sayon, being for the most part youngsters, women and strangers, were probably as unaware of how *abol* looked as Sayon himself.

Despite the fact that Sayon liked to present his encounters with local keepers of ritual objects as a dramatic contest of magicians throwing charms at each other, most probably it would be better described as a contest between people trying to fool each other. Sayon was described many times as a fool and a swindler, even by people who had followed him. We have already seen that the sufi imam of Yenguissa, Aboubacar Yuuf, did not want anything to do with him. In Bintimodia, not only the imam did not think Sayon knew how to pray but people were also surprised to see Sayon confiscate a copy of a “satanic” manuscript and keep it for himself instead of burning it immediately, as was expected of a good Muslim (as my informant from Bintimodia, a Muslim Malinke, told me). Many people thought Sayon was just after money, and it is probably true that money was behind his actions. Not only did a village have to pay to apply for his *jihad*, but also during his stay in a village, each woman had to pay 20 Frs. every morning, and people were obliged to buy his *asmani* (purifying perfume).

But who could put up any resistance? Sayon’s passage created a vicious circle that compelled people to join his group. Not to join, not to bring wood, water, money, not to buy his purifying perfume was a bold challenge, for it would immediately label someone as an evildoer who risked being beaten up. This was a big risk, since we know that the youth under the effervescent effect of the *kalima* could become so frantic as to even kill people.

Yet I would not say that fear and social pressure were the main reasons why people joined the *kalima*. Among them there was a strong yearning to dispose of many things, and sorcery and “fetishism” above all. In a missionary’s diary, I could read the words of a Christian man who, contrary to the missionary’s expectations, was exhorting the population of his village (Katako) to invite Sayon. “Let him come and help us destroy all the bad things and finish with sorcery and fetishism. After his passage, every one will be free to follow his own way (i.e. to be Christian or Muslim).”

In fact, whatever the intentions of Sayon, and whether he was a false or a real prophet (assuming such distinction has any sociological value²¹), the outcome of his passage was the subsequent impossibility to be publicly labelled as a “pagan.” After Sayon, a Baga could be either a Christian or a Muslim but no longer an animist. It was really the end of Baga “animism.”

There is one aspect of Asekou Sayon’s iconoclasm that requires special attention, and that is its commercial dimension. I do not think it is a coincidence that the picture of Sayon in Mare (Fig. 3) was taken by Maurice Nicaud, who was a French adventurer and tribal art collector. Nicaud was living at the time in Guinea, and he would go to visit Asekou Sayon in different villages and buy some of the objects he confiscated from the population. Many of my informants have insisted that Sayon did not burn all the objects. “He burnt some of them, but many of them we would put in a van and he would take them to Kindia, where his master Sékou Boubacar was living. Sékou Boubacar would then sell them to the Whites.” This was said to me by one of the men who used to be one of the “policemen” that Sayon nominated in each village (Mare, in this case; cf. Fig 3. The policemen are the men with whistles).

That notwithstanding, I do not mean that Sayon was only an African art dealer. In my view he was many things at the same time: an African art dealer, a freelance *marabout*, an R.D.A. ally (more so, I believe, by context than by political conviction), an anti-

²¹The distinction has a sociological value insofar as that people who did not follow Sayon accuse those who did follow him of having been fooled by a “*marabout escroc*” (swindler *marabout*), and this creates very lively debates and discussions in the villages.

witch by birth, a *jihadist* by training. The exact nature of his beliefs is not for me to determine. To say that he was a swindler and that he was exploiting the population would be to indulge in a value judgement beyond the strictures of a sociological description. Undoubtedly, he took advantage of the gullibility of the rural population, but maybe he was also sincerely convinced that his anti-sorcery powers were given to him by God. But then again, maybe he relied much more on his anti-witchcraft perfumes and amulets than on God and the Koran. In any case, what remains clear is that he had no problem in mixing the two things, that is, Islam and anti-sorcery charms. By looking at his picture taken by Maurice Nicaud in Mare, we can easily see how strongly protected he was with amulets (Fig. 3). Apart from these charms against evil, his red dress and his trident are also rather unusual for a Muslim preacher. The least we can say about Asekou Sayon is that he represented a *sui generis* variety of Islam -an Islam closer to beliefs in material charms than to the letter of the Koran, closer to African anti-witchcraft practices than to any ideal of a good Muslim, certainly quite far away from the ideal endorsed by Wahhabist reformers. For this reason he was criticised by some imams, as we have seen. If he had not worn all this protection of amulets, if he had burnt the “satanic” manuscripts he confiscated instead of keeping them for himself (as he did in Bintimodia), then he probably would have been accepted even by the most demanding imams of the region. But then, we may ask, would he have had the courage to enter the sacred bush of the fearsome Baga and cut down their awesome silk-cotton trees?

Leaving Asekou Sayon’s beliefs aside, the truth is that, at a superficial level at any rate, his iconoclasm was very effective: In many villages his *jihad* resulted in the clearing of the sacred bushes, whose locations were dedicated to the building of mosques (Kufen, Tolkoc), schools (Monchon), or “modern” crops (Mare). “Muslims have always had the monopoly of communications and of the opening-up [of communities],” wrote Jean-Luis Triaud (quoted in Larue 1988:87; my translation). We have seen in this chapter and in Chapter Four that many Baga people conceived of their customs as an element that kept them backward, as something they had to get rid of in order to engage in what they refer to as “the modern times.” This relationship between religious movements and the appropriation of modernity has been studied by French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Dozon (Dozon 1995). Dozon has argued that iconoclast movements work towards the

creation of a “public space” beyond the boundaries of small cults and initiatory provinces, an idea that Bayart has also explored in his analysis of religion and civil society (Bayart 1993a and 1993b). According to Dozon, in societies where spirits are held responsible for people’s misfortunes, the destruction of objects (perceived to be the “causes” of misfortunes) becomes the basis for the restoration of a healthy community. Since most prophetic, iconoclast movements are conducted by Christian or Muslim religious leaders, the new religious community will be much broader and macro-cosmic than the old ones. Dozon has analysed the relevance of prophetic movements in the making of an “Ivorian space,” shaping people’s common interests, experiences, and anti-colonial struggles in Côte d’Ivoire. On the whole, the history of Guinean prophetic movements remains unwritten, although we know that there have been many such movements since at least 1907 until 1957. The specific case of Asekou Sayon’s *jihad*, however, tends to support Dozon’s and Bayart’s views and to indicate a connection between the opening-up of a community (the Baga) and the creation of a broader Guinean space by the R.D.A.-P-D.G.

From the point of view of the cultural dynamics of Baga society, I think that the aftermath of Asekou Sayon’s actions would not have been so visible and traumatic had it not been accompanied by the strong anti-ethnic political agenda of the R.D.A. and especially of Sékou Touré’s regime. Iconoclasm in itself is not necessarily an irreversible process. Those who say that Sayon “destroyed” Baga culture disregard that culture is not only an object, but also the knowledge that made this object. Icons are destroyed and they are made. In one of his works on West African Islam, J.-C. Froelich mentioned a Muslim preacher (Sékou Sangare) who in 1948, supported by the R.D.A., undertook a *jihad* against the “fetishes” and worship places of some “pagan” societies in Côte d’Ivoire. But the French authorities decided to support, even with weapons, the “pagans.” The iconoclast preacher was chased away from the region and shortly after, Froelich tells us, “the masks were remade” (Froelich 1963:236-237; my translation). Even among the Baga, we can read in one of the French missionaries’ journals that in Tolkoc, in March 1957, a few months after the passage of Asekou Abdoulaye, the population had remade some of their masks. “May the *karamoko* come back” wrote the ironic father.

That the Baga knew how to recover from iconoclast movements is illustrated by the very fact that Asekou Sayon was not the first Muslim agitator they had ever known. In the last chapter, we saw that in 1914 a *sharif* undertook a *jihad* among the Sitem, supported by the Touré of Katongoro, and surely the arrival of Senegalese Tijani shaykhs such as Aboubacar Yuuf and Sidi Haidara in the 1920s provoked iconoclast upheavals. As for the Baga Koba, as early as 1907 they had an iconoclast Muslim preacher (Tibini Camara) who had four thousand followers²².

So, why is Sayon's movement so frozen in people's memories, so significant an event in the recent history of the Baga? I think that if Sayon's arrival is so present, so difficult to forget in comparison to earlier iconoclast movements in the same region, it is not because of the *jihad* itself, but of what happened afterwards. We have seen, for instance, that the Keita people of Katako hid their *abol* before Sayon's followers demolished their *kilo kipon*. We have also seen how "prepared" ("well seated," "sleeping in the appropriate position," etc.) the Baga people tell us they were to receive the iconoclast. It all seems to indicate that they would have returned (and probably with a vengeance) to their pre-Muslim religious practices.²³

But such a return became impossible. The Republic of Guinea that Sayon and many others had helped to build by destroying the "fetishes" and by creating a huge Guinean public space was not going to allow for such things as "paganism" to come back. As soon as Guinea became independent, a strong programme of "demystification" was put to work (Rivière 1969). "Fetishism" was identified with under-development, with class formation and with backwardness in general. Educational theatre was going to replace ritual initiations, and masks and other ritual objects, together with dances and songs, were going to be appropriated by the state with the purpose of creating a "national"

²² For Tibini, see the dossier in the National Archives of Guinea "Tibini Kamara" (A.N.G. SN 108 G). Cf. also Lerouge 1907 and his "*L'aventure de Tibini au Koba*" in the collection *Quand la Guinée s'appelait Les Rivières du Sud*.

²³ According to informants, many of those who followed Asekou Sayon died later in mysterious circumstances. I know of a whole Baga Sitem lineage who left the region and went in search of refuge among their corresponding lineage in a Baga Fore village. When I asked what had made them go, some Baga Sitem informants told me that it was "because they betrayed custom" by following Sayon in 1956.

folklore.

Besides, the constitution of the newly independent Guinea made ethnic particularism illegal. Article 45 declared that “every act of racial discrimination as well as all propaganda of a racial or regional character shall be punishable by law.” By 1962 President Sékou Touré wrote that:

There is no more in the Republic of Guinea the Malinke race, the Susu race, the Fulbe race, the Guerzé race, the Landuma or Kissi race. The Susu, Malinke, Toma, Guerzé, Fulbe, Landuma or Kissi have taken up their language differentiation as a means of communication between men. Thus, every youth of Guinea, every adult of Guinea asked about his race will reply that he is an African (Touré; cited by Mazrui and Tidy 1985:91).

The impossibility to return to previous initiations was stronger for the Baga than for other Guinean groups. Those in *Guinée Forestière* could and did continue their initiations by going to their relatives' villages in either of the two English-speaking countries. The Bassari and the Koniagui, the Biafada and the Nalu could go to Senegal and Guinea Bissau respectively. The Baga had nowhere to go, except maybe to their memories.

The end of initiations and of sacred bushes did not mean that the Baga ceased to pass down information and cultural knowledge from one generation to the other. In fact, if being “Baga” (as opposed to “Guinean”) was officially repressed, secretly speaking it was reinforced. Although Sayon succeeded in destroying ritual places and objects, the making of a public space was accompanied by a recrudescence of the secrecy attached to pre-Muslim practices and beliefs.

Let us go to Bukor once again to illustrate this point. We have seen that Asekou Sayon and Sékou Amadou marked the spot where the big mosque was to be built, in the very place where *amanco ngopon*'s performances used to take place. If one goes to Bukor today, the villagers will proudly show him/her their mosque. Only a few visitors will notice that at the side of the mosque, only a metre away from it, there is a long stone, where *amanco ngopon*'s interpreter used to speak from. Not that the Baga do not talk about this stone. In fact, they do talk about the stone, but they do so using the elusive

capafo genre, which will make it difficult for the visitor to get the message. The same applies to other places related to *amanco ngopon* and to other spirits. Sacrifices in the silk-cotton trees (since not all the silk-cotton trees were cut down) continued to be performed; but while before the silk-cotton trees were marked by a visible shrine, nowadays the maximum information one will be able to gather about these sacrifices and about the spirits that live in the trees is going to be some obscure *capafo* told when walking around the village with the villagers.

Lamin (thirty-five years old), one of the members of the *Dicola*, once told me that some time ago the elders of the lineage had taken him on a tour around the village and neighbouring regions, and explained to him the meanings of each tree and of each rock and their relationship to *amanco ngopon*. This is not “initiation” in the classical sense of the word, but it certainly is transmission of knowledge.

These examples show that the outcome of the iconoclast movement was not as much “destruction” as it was concealment, but a concealment that coincided with the official end of initiations and with the prohibition to reinstall them. This is very important in order to understand the generational gap we find among the Baga today. Although secrecy is a common feature of many West-African societies, among the Baga it has been reinforced by the fact that, for so many years, they have had to pretend not to be involved in anything related to “paganism.” In this pretending, they are so expert that it took me a whole year before realizing that Bukor, in particular, had a strong presence of *amanco ngopon* and of other spirits, as well as a special grove for the *alipne* or initiated elders to meet. Before, I would have simply assumed that Bukor was a completely Muslim village. “Tell him everything he needs to know,” a *ressortissant* once exhorted his village fellows, referring to me and to my dissertation, “but do not show him anywhere, since there is no need for that.” Speaking as he was in Baga Sitem, he obviously did not know that I could understand his exhortation. He was probably referring to the grove where the *alipne* meet or to other places such as those shown to Lamin in Mare. In any case, in today’s Guinea secrecy does not seem to suit everybody’s need, and many insist, as I will discuss in the next chapter, that Baga culture should be displayed, and that initiated elders should pass their knowledge and objects down to the youths.

5.5. Conclusion: From Baga to Guinean

Our society is achieved by getting rid of the failings inherited from the past; from the fetishist past, from the colonial past, and from the feudal past. From the past, we must only retain whatever elements can consolidate our national unity.

Sékou Touré, (Touré 1976:90; my translation).

Asekou Sayon's life and deeds represented the transition from one time to another one. He was born and educated at a time and in a region of *grands marabouts*, and he used (and was used by) the Muslim ideological tendencies of the R.D.A. He learned how to use the oppression people felt and their thirst for social change, and in so doing he collaborated in the creation of a new political order in which, however, there was no room for himself.

In this chapter I have concentrated on the movement that opposed youths to elders in 1956/57. In as much as the youths who followed Sayon felt oppressed by elders, chiefs, and customs, this movement could be described as a "liberation movement." In practice, however, liberation was not what the Baga found. Once Guinea's independence was achieved in 1958, the régime of Sékou Touré became increasingly oppressive towards practices not aiming at "national unity" (such was indeed the title of one of the many books he wrote).

As Lapidó Adamolekun has pointed out, Sékou Touré was aware that the Republic of Guinea was a "juridically constituted state without historical entity" (Touré 1966:44; translated and quoted by Adamolekun 1976:116) and he explicitly prescribed that the task of the post-independence régime was to build a "nation" within the framework of the state (Adamolekun 1976:116). The methods he followed to formulate and make effective this national identity are the object of Adamolekun's thorough study, although as a political scientist he is mainly interested in the political dimensions of building a citizenry in a single political community. Other authors have paid attention to Sékou Touré's cultural policies and to what Wolfgang Bender has called the "bureaucratisation of culture" (Bender 1991:8) and particularly to the

making of an official national “folklore” (Kaba 1976, Miller 1990, Bender 1991, Lamp 1993, 1996a, 1996b:233-39). It was mostly a folklore made up of elements from different regions, publicly displayed in National Museums and projected to an international audience via Keita Fodeba’s famous company *Les Ballets Africains* (for a history of this company, see Rouget 1956, Miller 1990) and Aboubabar Demba Camara’s orchestra *Bembeya National Jazz* (Bender 1991:11-12).

I am not providing in this thesis a section on Sékou Touré’s period. This period has become a common difficulty for people working on Guinean populations, and despite my interest in archives and in historical reconstructions, I did not do any better than the others. However, I think that in order to understand the current events in today’s democratizing Guinea and the discourses about what it means to be Baga in Guinea today, the processes discussed in Chapter Four and in this one are in the main more relevant than the trials and tribulations experienced by the Baga under Sékou Touré, which for the moment will remain unexplored. In the next chapter we will see how today’s politics of cultural reification are to be understood against the backdrop of Asekou Sayon’s reputed “cultural destruction.”

Chapter 6

Revitalising Baga culture, rewriting Baga history

While I did not go to Guinea with the objective of stimulating the revival of pre-Islamic Baga culture, the fact is that this is what happened. (Lamp 1996b:256).

6.1. Introduction

The above quotation by art historian Frederick Lamp, who conducted several fieldwork sessions among the Baga between 1985 and 1992, contains a whole range of issues that I want to address in this chapter. First and foremost, it establishes an opposition between Islamic and pre-Islamic Baga culture, the latter being the culture of the Baga before Asekou Sayon destroyed it, which is to put it in the very words Lamp, as well as most of my Baga informants, would use. While the opposition between the two cultural periods needs some revision, the fact remains that Baga conceptualise their history on this basis. For this reason Asekou Sayon's *jihad* could be interpreted as a structural transformation, a switch from one cultural period to another, at the very least in the way Baga people regard and present their own history. In the second place, the quotation categorically asserts that the Baga are today (or at any rate at the time Lamp conducted his field research) engaged in the revival of this pre-Islamic culture. Whether or not this is the case will be the main theme of this chapter. Last but not least the quotation testifies to the role of the foreign researcher in the stimulation of self-conscious Baga cultural activities, be they masquerade performances or highly reflexive historical discourses about themselves.

6.2. Displaying a Baga folklore

Against the political background of Sékou Touré's repressive regime alluded to at the end of the last chapter, the situation found after the installation of the second Republic by President Lansana Conté in 1984, with the increasing democratisation

and decentralisation of Guinea thereafter, is most striking. What we see in Guinea today is the engagement of specific ethnic groups in reappropriating what they perceived as “their” own cultural heritages. Many of them are officially resuming their initiation and other rituals which were banned under Sékou Touré’s policy of repression of cultural particularism.

Although the Baga undoubtedly belong to these groups who are eager to express their cultural difference by any possible means, the specific question as to whether they are in a moment of cultural “revitalisation” is a rather difficult one, despite Lamp’s unproblematic optimism about it. In this chapter we will see that, in fact, concepts of Baga culture are very contested, not only among Baga informants but among researchers as well. We will see that “revitalisation” is a very ambiguous term. What is to some revitalisation, is to others an indicator of a cultural loss.

A word of caution has indeed to be pronounced about the application of the concept of revitalisation to refer to the reintroduction of practices that have been out of use for a longer or shorter period of time. Despite its frequent use in anthropology, “revitalisation” is quite a problematic concept. Anthony Wallace, who coined the concept of “revitalisation movement,” defined revitalisation as “a conscious, organised effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1956:265). In many cases (certainly in the Native-American prophetic movements studied by him), this effort implied a great deal of rupture with the past and an engagement with new practices such as literacy or conversion to universal religions, rather than the reactivating of abandoned indigenous rituals or beliefs. Asekou Sayon’s *jihad* and the rejection of the past that it gave rise to would probably have been regarded, paradoxically, as a genuine revitalisation movement by a strictly Wallaceian observer and so would the engagement of today’s Baga youths with Catholicism and football (see below). Of course, many of the revitalisation movements analysed by American cultural anthropologists influenced by Wallace were past-oriented or likely to be interpreted as such (like the Bwiti cult among the

Fang analysed by Fernandez (Fernandez 1982), to name a particularly influential one), but such past-orientation was not implicit in the concept forged by Wallace.

Today, however, there is an increasing tendency to use “revitalisation” to express exclusively the resumption or reinvention of native practices that have been neglected, banned, or forgotten. In the Swedish scholar Anders Salomonsson’s view, “if an isolated object or phenomenon, such as an older dish typical of a certain region, is taken up and used again, this should be viewed as an indication of the revitalisation idea” (Salomonsson 1984:34). I think most contemporary anthropologists would agree with him without pondering that “revitalisation” was once referred to quite a different set of phenomena other than the mere “resumption of older cultural features,” which is this author’s minimal definition of the concept (Salomonsson 1984:47). Incidentally, Salomonsson’s research is apposite here since he sees a correlation between revitalisation and what he, following Konrad Kostlin, calls “the regionalization of culture.” Although these authors base their studies in Europe, this combination of cultural and regional revitalisations is also present in current-day Africa and I think that in Africa, as in Europe, the politics of regionalisation and those of cultural revitalisation go hand-in-glove and must be studied together.

This switch in the anthropological application of “revitalisation” may testify to how movements in search of “a more satisfying culture” in the 1950s and today differ - particularly how the appreciations of local pasts have changed at a global level during the second half of the 20th century. In this sense, the history of the Baga from their *jihad* in 1956 to their current reification of heritage offers a paradigm of a much wider trend in the global politics of culture. Yet, as we will see, underneath this quasi-paradigmatic historical structure, which would regard Baga post-colonial history as a movement from a cultural destruction to a cultural revival, there are two important qualifications to be made. Firstly, we have already seen in the last chapter that Asekou Sayon’s *jihad* was not as destructive as many would think. Secondly, we are going to see in this chapter that today’s cultural revitalisation is terribly difficult

to assess. The conscious recreation and display of tradition, which to some would be an index of revitalisation, remains in fact more a programme than a reality and as such belongs more to the realm of discourse than to the realm of local everyday practices. Yet, paradoxically, the increasing involvement of Baga *ressortissants* in their native regions is accompanied by the reintroduction of ritual practices and by the reinforcement of village age and power structures. Here we *do* have a cultural revitalisation, albeit one that is not public but secret; not discursive but practical; not addressed to an external audience but meant to remind the villagers of some elementary structures of power and knowledge.¹

However we define it, scholarly as well as local discussions and perceptions of revitalisation among the Baga must be contextualised in the broader Guinean arena. In Guinea as a whole, a straightforward revitalizing-cum-retraditionalizing process is apparent among some ethnic groups, such as the Toma, the Kissi and other *Forestière* peoples, i.e. those living in the rain forest area that borders Sierra Leone and Liberia. Christian Hoejbjerg has studied the reintroduction of the Poro institution and of initiation rituals among the Toma in Nzerekore Prefecture (Hoejbjerg 1995). Their neighbours the Kissi, the largest of the forest groups (some 130,000 people) are a very interesting case for us because many Kissi live close to or together with the Baga, both in Conakry and in the industrial city of Kamsar, where many of the employees of the *Compagnie des Bauxites Guinéennes* (C.B.G.) are Kissi. Comparisons between the two groups are inevitable not only for external researchers but among Guineans themselves, especially among informants from the two groups themselves. In 1994 I witnessed a conversation between a Kissi deputy and an educated Baga man in Conakry, in which the latter was explaining that the Baga no longer had sacred bushes "because we thought that was a backward thing and we opted for schools instead," while the former was proudly saying that modernity and sacred bushes were not at odds and that without them the Kissi would not be who

¹ The involvement of *ressortissants* in their respective villages' affairs is a common trend in Guinea, linked to the processes of democratisation and decentralisation. As we will see, notions of Baga "culture" and potential audiences for discourses about it are very different for *ressortissants* than for villagers.

they are. Over the last fifteen years, in fact, the Kissi have been initiating their boys in sacred bushes as they used to do before Sékou Touré's times, and they see the maintenance of initiation rituals as a crucial element of their cultural identity.² However, it is also true that during Sékou Touré's time the Kissi continued to initiate their youngsters by sending them to Liberia or to Sierra Leone. Without this continuity in the neighbouring countries, the reintroduction of their initiation in Guinea, in the 1980s, would have been a much more difficult endeavour.

The Baga find themselves in a much more compromised situation. Their manhood initiations ceased in the 1950s (in a manner much more abrupt than that of the *Forestière* peoples) and, unlike the Kissi or the Toma, they could not continue their initiations in any other country. This means that the generational gap between elders (*wubeki*, pl. *abeki*) and youths (*wuan*, pl. *awut*) is in some way institutionalised and, to date, frozen. *Abeki* are those who had been initiated in the pre-independence times and *awut* are those who had not. Thus Kande Bangoura, one of my brothers in the *Dicola* lineage of Mare, was considered to be a youngster despite the fact that he was in his late forties, and married with five children. Yet his classificatory father Youssouff Bangoura, who was only four or five years older than Kande, was an *wibeki* because he had been initiated.³

² The identification between initiation rituals and cultural identity is a widespread phenomenon. According to Hoejbjerg, the Toma may interpret the swallowing of boys by the Poro spirit as being swallowed into their tradition (Hoejbjerg 1991). When I asked the Baga Catholic priest Dominique Camara about *amanco ngopon* in my first interview, he replied "*amanco ngopon* was the keeper of the tradition," and similar answers were given to me by other informants. Peter Mark has explored the link between commodifying initiation rituals and expressing cultural identity among the Jola in Casamance (Mark 1994). In fact, a Jola post-doctoral fellow I met in Paris was astonished to know that the Baga had not taken up their abandoned initiation rituals, and told me that without initiations and sacred bushes there is no way to maintain a people's cultural identity.

³ Other than biological age, there is of course a question of *danapa* or age group involved in this situation, as none of the classificatory brothers of Kande have been initiated and all of their "fathers" have. While Kande is one of the oldest of his group, Youssouff is one of the youngest of his. In any case, it is striking that discussions about relative age always made reference to the fact that the *abeki* had been initiated into the sacred bush and the *awut* had not.

This generational situation creates competing views on what Baga “culture” is and on what aspects of it are accessible, and to whom. Baga culture becomes a precious resource and many negotiations must be done to have access to it and to allow it to be folklorised. At the same time, as we are going to see in the next section, the degrees to which villages let cultural goods be “folklorised” differ enormously. While some villages (like Bukor) still hold to a strict distinction between a secret sphere and a public domain and most masks and dances belong to the former, other villages, most notably Katako, have created *troupes de théâtre* (folkloric troupes) that offer a display of Baga masquerades for tourists, political visitors or film-makers. (There have been several national and international documentary films on Baga culture; the most recent of them is Laurent Chevalier’s *Aoutara*, a film about the tour of a troupe of Baga female singers from Conakry, called *Aoutara*, into the *Bagatai* in 1996. This is a valuable document on the relationship between *ressortissants* and villagers, and female ones in particular. It is very significant that these women, albeit aged and married, are still called *Aoutara*, feminine of *awut*, youths. In general, both male and female *ressortissants* are considered as youngsters, as opposed to the *abeki/abekira* of the village).

Here I am using the notion of “folklorisation” as a self-conscious objectification of what people perceive to be their folklore or tradition and its display in cultural performances. The concept was coined by the German anthropologist Herman Bausinger (Bausinger [1961] 1990). In West Africa, the analytical possibilities of the concept have been explored by Peter Mark (Mark 1994) and by Ferdinand de Jong (Jong 1997) in their analyses of the Jola *troupes folkloriques* (not dissimilar to the Guinean *troupes de théâtre*). It is true that the Baga do not use the concept of folklore very often, although it is a well-known term in Guinea and some Catholic Baga do use it. Sometimes it is used as a synonym for theatre, and sometimes as a category explicitly opposed to notions of secrecy, as when Charles Bangoura from Mare told me in 1995 that all the film-makers doing films on Baga masquerades are only getting Baga folklore, but not their secrets. Similarly, in one conversation I had with a French Catholic priest in Katako, I was told that Baga culture is dead and that today

they only have “folklore.” The categorical opposition between a living culture and mere folklore was interesting. What the priest meant, to put it in my own words, is that in order for certain cultural goods to be reintroduced into the public space they have to be presented as folklore and not as something people believe in. This is certainly what happens in the village of Katako where the big Catholic mission is located. In other villages, I must insist, things are quite different. Not only in the village of Bukor are sacrifices to *amanco ngopon* still made in a climate of secrecy, but even in the village of Kakilenc, much closer to Katako, a meeting took place some years ago in order for the elders to discuss whether or not to display no less that the whole *amanco ngopon* construction to honour a visit of President Lansana Conté. Showing important masks to political visitors is of course a widespread African practice. Yet, in this particular case the elders decided, in the end, not to do it, and instructed the villagers to show the *nimba* headdress instead. I could not get any further detail of these negotiations but even from the superficial description the structure is clear⁴. The elders knew that reintroducing the *amanco ngopon* in the public arena would be to downgrade it from “culture” to “folklore” (to use the priest’s dichotomy) or, to use indigenous cultural categories, from *tolom* to *powolsene*, two concepts that are structurally opposed. *Tolom* (pl. *molom*) is a difficult word to translate, covering a semantic field impossible to convey with a single English word; it may mean “secret” (as in the secrets learnt in initiation, not to be revealed), but it is also used to refer to masks, and especially to masks only to be seen by initiated people. To illustrate the difficulty in translating the category of *tolom*, I will point out that properly speaking the *molom* are not “learnt” in initiation, but rather “eaten” (*kidi molom*). This may seem just a small detail, but when I asked my informants to elaborate on it I realized that the translation of (eaten) *molom* as (learnt) “secrets” misses out a very interesting dimension of the embodiment and transmission of Baga culture. *Powolsene* (pl. *yowolsene*) means “toy” and is used to refer to certain masks the purpose of which is mainly to entertain, such as *nimba*,

⁴ This information was revealed to me by my adoptive father Arafan Bangoura, who was afraid that I was getting the wrong picture and assuming that Asekou Sayon had got away with his destructive intentions. Occasionally he would give me a few hints to prove to me that the Baga *abeki* are still in full control of their *molom* (secrets).

sibondel and some others. To downgrade *amanco ngopon* from *tolom* to *powolsene* would also be for the elders to give it to the youths and lose the power they maximise by keeping it secret. It is likely that the appropriation of *abeki*'s masks by youths is a constant in Baga history. According to Lamp, the *nimba* headdress, today clearly a mask for youths to play with, was in the past a mask of the elders which was later appropriated by the youths (Lamp 1996b:162-163).

In order to analyse the cultural dynamics outlined so far, namely the generational and regional dimensions of Baga cultural identity, I am now going to discuss the preparation of the annual Baga football tournament. This case study will allow us to compare different villages and their different degrees of folklorisation, and at the same time to analyse the generational element in constructions of cultural identity.

6.3. Football: the generation game

The "*jeux du littoral*," as Baga football tournaments are called, were created in 1989 by the *Jeunesse Agricole Catholique*, which had been reactivated in 1985 by the French *Pères du Saint-Esprit* when they were readmitted in Guinea. The cup given to the winner of the tournament was accordingly baptised *Coupe Bienvenu* in honour of Father Gustave Bienvenu, the very charismatic Superior Father of the Mission of Katako, who had been among the Baga of Katako in his youth (from 1958 to 1966) and came back in 1985.

When discussing this tournament, the comparison with previous times and activities, and especially masquerades, is often present in informants' responses, both youths and elders. The tournament is conceived of as having the same function as old masquerades, especially the famous *nimba* (Figure 7). The logo of the tournament (as in T-shirts, etc.) is normally a combination of a *nimba* headdress and a football. That was the case in Mare 1994, Bukor 1995, and Kifinda 1997. In Kawass 1996 the logo was, rather significantly, just a football without any concession to Baga tradition (see discussion below). The *nimba* headdress, which used to be danced during fertility-

related occasions (marriages, harvest), is especially loved by the Baga for many reasons. One reason is because it is simply a nice mask to dance, its uses not having anything to do with witch-cleansing, initiation rituals or anything of that sort. It is not a mask that expresses *differences* among categories of individuals but rather that brings them together in joyful celebrations. It is clearly not a *tolom* (a secret mask only to be seen by initiated elders) but a *powolsene* (a “toy,” i.e. a mask for youths to play with), as informants like to insist. In the past, *nimba* masquerades used to attract and gather people from different villages, and although the playful aspect is beyond any doubt, there was a certain competitive element in them, especially in the beauty of the headdress itself. According to the memories of the elders, headdresses used to be individualised by having a single female name, and some of them were so attractive that their particular performance would always be remembered as a success.

Like *nimba* masquerades in the past, today's football tournaments are meant to bring Baga people together. As my adoptive father told me when pondering the virtues of the tournament:

People no longer know which are their corresponding lineages in other villages, because we have been too isolated for too long. Now this football tournament forces young people to go to other villages and know their people there as they have to stay in the house of their corresponding lineage when they go to another village.

The tournament does indeed bring to life kinship and other ties among villages. But, as I am going to show in this chapter, it not only reactivates a common identity that has been dormant for many years, as the straightforward “cultural revitalisation” thesis would have it; it also gives expression to a redefinition of identities that are increasingly taking on a territorial and regional dimension, although they do not ignore blood links. Thus, villages that were previously considered as “Baga” are left out of the tournament, either because they are too far for the majority of Baga youth to travel to or simply because they are not considered as being Baga enough. In 1994 I witnessed a request for inclusion in the Mare tournament on the part of some

villages belonging to the ancient Kakissa region, which were denied inclusion. "Maybe they were Baga in the past, but they are not Baga today," replied the president of the Youth Committee of Mare when I asked him about the refusal of the application.

The football tournament also creates divisions and alliances between villages or clusters of villages, which again may have a kinship rationale, but which are more strongly marked by a politico-territorial element than by a kinship one. I'll come back to this point later.

For our purposes, the most interesting thing about the tournament is that, year after year, it is announced that its opening will be accompanied by what we would call a cultural festival. They call it "carnival"⁵ and in theory it involves the display of "traditional" Baga masks, dances and other cultural goods. That masks will appear is particularly insisted upon by the *ressortissants* of the villages now living in Conakry, who play a very important role in the tournament, especially in mobilising its financial support. The youths in the villages are also excited about the masks, but they are more sceptical about the reality of the promises made by their spokesmen. In fact, masks and the knowledge related to them (especially the secret ones or *tolom*) belong to the elders of the villages, who were initiated in the pre-independence times and who do not allow youths to play with them, since they are not things to play with. They do not see the ideological importance that some youths and most Conakry-based Baga people (who, to the eyes of the elders, are also youths) give to the public display of Baga culture, and they do not see why football and masquerades should go together. As a consequence, the annual process of preparing the tournament consists of an endless dialogue between the youths, the elders and the *ressortissants*.

⁵ The word "carnival," often used in the region of Boké to refer to masquerades, is probably borrowed from the neighbouring country of Guinea Bissau, which, as an ex-Portuguese colony, has a great tradition of carnivals.

At first, so I am told, village elders did not really want to become involved in the games. They considered that they were for the kids and should not concern them. Yet, little by little they started to realise the importance of the tournament for the collective development of the villages, and the *ressortissants*, who normally are very respectful and fearful of the elders' actions, became more and more insistent that the games should happen with the help of the elders, or under their instructions. The elders became increasingly involved, and started to make sacrifices to empower the young players of their respective villages. The situation we find nowadays is that both youths and elders are equally involved in the tournament, with separate but integral roles. While the youth play the actual games, the elders become instrumental in making sacrifices and prayers to ensure that the tournaments will happen in the best conditions and that their boys will win the cup. Youths play for the cup and for the possibility to be promoted to better Guinean teams. Elders become involved, as an old man from Bukor once put it to me, because it is the honour of their village that is at stake. I will come back to this double activity of youths and elders later, but let us first look at the explicit cultural programmes of the opening carnivals, which work as a counterpoint to this double game of juniors' football and elders' ritual activities. In what follows I am going to describe three consecutive tournaments (Mare 1994, Bukor 1995, and Kawass 1996) and their respective carnivals, with the objective of analysing the cultural and social dynamics that the tournaments give rise to.

6.3.1. Mare 1994

The preparation of the tournament of April 1994 in Mare coincided with my ethnographic fieldwork in the village, which I had started almost a year earlier. Some people were very insistent on the folkloric aspect of the tournament, both in Mare and elsewhere. "You are very lucky," said my adoptive brother Kande, "because your stay coincides with the tournament, and you are going to see things that otherwise would not be shown." I must admit I became quite excited as comments of this kind became more and more frequent. One of the most active Baga intellectuals in Conakry is Maurice M. Bangoura, a Mare *ressortissant* who announced with such an

insistence that the tournament would be opened with a display of “traditional” Baga culture that even a few Europeans based in Conakry came expectantly to the village. They were to be disappointed when they realised that football and not masks is what a football tournament is about. It is true that a *nimba* headdress was danced by a Katako troupe (Figure 7) in a rather unstructured way, but that was all. Maurice M. Bangoura had even written a long text on the history and culture of the Baga that he promised to read on the occasion of the opening, but to my surprise and disappointment he did not. I imagine that once in the village, under the pressure of his elders, he realised that “history” and “culture” are secret things not to be given away in public speeches. This change in *ressortissants*’ attitudes towards tradition is quite a common feature. As I have already said, *ressortissants* are considered as youths, and must pay obedience to villages’ elders and adhere to local customs.⁶

This lack of “folklorisation” and of reflexivity (i.e. the use of the occasion for the Baga to explain to themselves their history and culture) was accompanied by a recrudescence of sorcery actions and witchcraft gossip. Thus, the death of a young boy who fell from a tree while observing a match was said to be a sacrifice to *amanco ngopon* made by the people of Bukor to win the cup. The fact that subsequently Bukor (a village particularly feared for its witchcraft in 1994⁷) did win the cup against all predictions reinforced these beliefs in witchcraft. Since Bukor was to organise the next tournament (1995), all these rumours had to be taken very seriously by the *Abukor*. And they were, as we will see in the next section.

⁶This is the kind of situation that, as Peter Geschiere and Joseph Gugler have recently argued (Geschiere and Gugler 1998), reformulates the mechanical duality of “citizens” and “subjects” offered by Mamdani in his influential latest book (Mamdani 1996). It is not that a kind of nationals can be categorized as citizens because they enjoy civil rights and a participation in the political community, as opposed to a mass of peasant subjects who live according to their customary law. “Citizens” must also learn to subject themselves to local custom and law if they want to have a voice to in the villages. With the increasing re-ethnization of African states and the search for local constituencies, this qualification must be taken very seriously. In Guinea, politicians are often asked to participate in customary initiation if they want to be listened to in the villages.

⁷1994 was a very bad year for Bukor since many people died in a cholera epidemic, and these deaths were associated with witchcraft.

One thing relating to the Mare 1994 tournament that particularly struck me came to my knowledge only in April 1996, two years after the facts, in a discussion that was not about the tournament itself but about the structures of power in Mare. In a conversation I was having in Conakry with a few people from Mare, they revealed to me that the head of *amanco ngopon* was kept by a lineage of one of the three wards of Mare and that it was precisely in the midst of the tournament that the elders of that lineage met in order to decide who had to be in charge of the sacred item. The reasons given to me as to why they chose such a context in order to make such important decisions were, on the one hand, because the matches would make sure that the youths were out of the way at the stadium and, on the other hand, because the tournament would bring together people from the lineage who lived elsewhere. This provides us, once again, with some elements of reflection about the notion of “revitalisation.” While the carnival on the opening day was quite poor and the French visitors left with the feeling that Baga culture was finished, the tournament as a whole reproduced the old structure of typical *powolsene* masquerades, one that keeps youths and strangers away from elders and allows the latter to make decisions in protected secrecy.

6.3.2. Bukor 1995

Some of Bukor’s characteristics have already been presented in previous parts of this thesis. In the beginning of my fieldwork, while I was based in Mare, Bukor was a village about which people in Mare and other villages often talked with a tone of mystery and potential danger. Kande Bangoura once told me that only a few years ago he went to Bukor and found that he was forced to stay indoors because a certain masquerade was being performed in a witch-cleansing ritual and he, not being initiated, was not allowed to behold the mask. I eventually became more familiar with Bukor since Aboubacar Camara was a native of this village. Thus, a few months after I started to enquire about the village I realised that it was unique - a village that, as has been said in Chapter Three, had retained the pyramidal age structure with the

alipne (sing. *wilipne*) at its apex, a selection of initiated elders from different lineages who regularly met in a grove in the middle of the village forbidden to be visited by anyone else. The village was unique also in its presence of *amanco ngopon*, or rather in his significant absence. Aboubacar Camara was always terrified about the haste with which people in Mare and some other villages dared mention the name of *amanco ngopon*. "In Bukor you cannot mention his name so flippantly, certainly not in the presence of the *alipne*," he used to say. And he was right. The non-pronunciation of *amanco ngopon*'s name may lead one to believe that the *Abukor* (natives of Bukor) have abandoned *amanco ngopon*, but it is in fact quite the opposite. Still as recently as 1986, the *Abukor* made a sacrifice known as *kibok* (lit. "wailing") in order to summon up *amanco ngopon*. Many cows were killed and many people were present, including all the *ressortissants* of Bukor. I was not able to fully clarify the object of the *kibok*, since people were not willing to discuss it with me. According to one informant, it was due to an increase of witchcraft, while others told me it was meant to bless the *ressortissants* of Bukor who live in Conakry. The two explanations are not incompatible. Maybe the objective was a combination of different things. In any case, the ritual partially worked, since although *amanco* did not appear, his howl was heard coming from the bush.

The preparation of the tournament in Bukor in 1995 was even more interesting to follow than that of 1994 in Mare. To start with, people were afraid of going to Bukor because of witchcraft actions and sacrifices to *amanco*, whose presence in Bukor is said to be stronger than in other villages. Some young people from Mare and other villages told me that they would not go to the tournament. People from Bukor had to take action against this predicament (the point of the tournament being, of course, to gather as many people as possible and not to scare them away).

To bypass the problem, Bukor's *ressortissants* in Conakry decided that in order not to let witchcraft attacks happen during the three weeks that the tournament normally takes place, they would let the *alipne* or council of initiated elders take care of the situation. The *alipne*, accordingly, performed a series of rituals that are known as

kinger and glossed as “the closing of the land” (closing it for as long as they want to, sometimes up to six months). These are very solemn actions which are very rarely performed and which theoretically make it impossible for people to die from witchcraft attacks. In the days when Baga people had long initiation rituals, the closing of the land was linked to these rituals and to the appearance in the village of the high spirit *amanco ngopon* (these two things going hand-in-hand, since *amanco ngopon* could only appear in a closed land). To my knowledge, the last time the land had been closed in the *Bagatai* had also been in Bukor, during the 1986 *kibok* described above. The closing of the land for the 1995 tournament had nothing to do with *amanco ngopon* but rather with prevention of witchcraft during the tournament, but of course the association between the two elements (that is, this ritual and *amanco ngopon*) was in the minds of all Baga people. And the fact that the *alipne* of Bukor dared close the land in order to hold the football tournament did indeed frighten many people. The outcome was that some villages did not allow their children to compete in such a dangerous village. This may seem a bit contradictory, since *kinger* is nothing “bad,” but we have to understand that the elders of these other villages were afraid that their “irresponsible” kids would not know the importance of a *kinger* and they would not respect it, having to “pay” deadly consequences later. When a village is in *kinger*, for instance, unmarried people are not allowed to have sex, nor can any married person have illicit adventures. Yet, sex is obviously part of the fun youths search for on occasions such as a football tournament.

It was also decided that the *alipne* should be in charge of the preparation of the carnival, so that the outcome would be better than the poorly prepared *nimba* performance of the previous year in Mare. This year it had to be done properly. When the opening day arrived, there were a few dances and two masks: *nimba* and *sibondel*, which were danced under the direct control of the *alipne* and, as many people interpreted, “in the old way.” But for the *ressortissants* of Conakry, these two masks were not enough. I remember talking to a few of them before the tournament took place. They insisted on the inclusion in their carnival of the old initiation dance (*kikenc*), which had not been performed in the village since the early fifties. They

sent a special commission to Bukor to discuss the issue with the *alipne*, who at first did not show an open opposition to the idea and people in Conakry were very excited about it. I was somewhat hastily told by one of them that a group of young people had already been chosen by the *alipne* in order to be taught how to dance the *kikenc*. But then, as the tournament approached, the *alipne* refused to teach the youths the secret *kikenc*. They said that football is just a game and that in consequence only games can be played: *nimba* and *sibondel*, two masks that beyond any doubt fall into the category of *powolsene* and not *tolom*. But even these toys had to be danced according to their strict directions. Despite the lack of the *kikenc*, the outcome was a success of which the Baga of Bukor felt very proud, with the visit of the first lady of Guinea (the wife of President Conté, a Baga herself) and national TV coverage into the bargain.

6.3.3. Kawass 1996

In 1996 the tournament was held in Kawass. Kawass is as different a Baga village from Bukor as one can imagine. Whereas Bukor is still an enclave in the mangroves and during many months of the year only reachable by boat, Kawass is only eight kilometres from Kamsar, on the main road between Kamsar and Conakry. Kamsar is the site of a major bauxite port and factory, run by the international C.B.G. (*Compagnie de Bauxites Guinéennes*). It harbours almost 50,000 inhabitants (some of them American or European) and it is the main focus of modernising forces into the Boké hinterland and along the coast. The little airport of Kamsar (proposed to become an international one) is in fact in Kawass. Catholic missionaries are very active in Kawass. Added to that, the social tissue is very different. Half the population of Kawass is Susu, and the Baga element has not kept the structure based on age and ritual knowledge that we have just seen in Bukor. The tournament of Kawass was also accompanied by a carnival, but a rather poor and short one at that. Three masks were shown and dances around them performed: one of them represented an airplane, the other one a helicopter, and the third one a boat (Fig. 8 and 9). That people from Kawass had to display such consciously modern masks was

criticised by people from other areas “as though they had forgotten their roots,” a *ressortissant* from Mare told me a few days later in Conakry.

As a digression I will say that personally I think the opposite to these critics of modernity. I think we could see the creolisation of Kawass’s headdresses as a sign of cultural vitality, a proof that people in Kawass have learnt to live with the proximity of Kamsar, whose modernity they indigenize in order to express their own distinct identity. I feel that the structure underneath these modern masks is not different from that underneath older, more traditional ones. Airplanes and boats are meant to express *connection* between different realms of reality and, while at the superficial level they only connect land with air or with water, they also connect the Western modernity of Kamsar to the Bagatai and vice versa. Some of the “classic” Baga masks were also meant to connect different realms of reality, as expressed in their shapes of “liminal” beings such as crocodiles or birds. Once more, we see them connecting not only natural elements but also bringing together the realm of the unknown, invisible world (*dabal*) with that of the world of the senses (*dwuru*). It is useful to recall that the modernity of Kamsar and the powers of *dabal* are not as opposed as are the concepts of “tradition” and “modernity” in our analytical language. In fact, Kamsar, with its invisible, sinister companion *Mpame* (see Chapter Two), can be described as *dabal par excellence*. Ogotemmêli the Dogon once said in his famous conversations with Marcel Griaule that “the society of masks is the whole world” (Griaule 1966:202), something we should keep in mind if we are to understand the dynamics of West African masquerades and the appropriations of external features into masks and masquerades, instead of making ultimate statements about the death of a culture.

Curiously enough, the lack of cultural display was accompanied by an increase in reflexivity, as one of the activities that happened during the first day of the tournament was the reading of a text on the history of the village written by a *ressortissant* of Kawass, a secondary school teacher.

6.3.3.1 Boffa vs. Boké: The regionalisation of cultural identities

One important characteristic of the Kawass tournament was that it very soon became a fight between two different geographical regions: *Araponka* vs. *Kakande*. “*Araponka*” and “*Kakande*” are the vernacular names of the territories around, respectively, Rio Pongo (that is, the region around Boffa town) and Rio Nuñez (that is, the region around Boké town). Boffa and Boké are nowadays different prefectures. It so happens that Boké is the prefecture where Kamsar and its modernising element is located, while the Baga villages in Boffa Prefecture are not reached by development agencies based in Kamsar, and geographically they are much more remote in the mangrove. While most villages in Boké are Baga Sitem, villages in Boffa are mostly Bulongic, except for Bukor, Kalikse and some households in the village of Yampon.

The crudeness of the opposition between *Araponka* and *Kakande* was really new to me, as was in fact the use of these two words to refer to what are normally called Boffa and Boké. (For the sake of clarity, in the remainder of this chapter I will only retain the last two designations.) The previous year, in the Bukor tournament, the cup had been won by Kufen, which in terms of kinship and migration narratives is a very close village to Bukor. According to oral tradition, Kufen was founded by the younger brother of Bukor’s founder and the two villages (together with Kalikse) belong to the province of *Mantung*, although, as we saw in Chapter Two, the division of *Mantung* province into *Mantung* (village of Bukor) and *Simantor* (villages of Kufen and Kalikse) was already done in colonial times.

This victory was at first very much welcomed by people from Bukor, considering that since Kufen is their younger brother, the victory belonged to them. This follows the widespread West African custom according to which whatever is given to someone, his older brothers have full rights over it, and some Bukor informants told me that they had “allowed” Kufen to win. However, administratively Kufen belongs to Boké (while Bukor belongs to Boffa) and therefore people from Kufen started to celebrate

their victory together with other people from other villages in Boké. This endorsed the claim that it had been a victory of Boké over Boffa (although they would speak of *Kakande* vs. *Araponka*). It was also, to put it in other words, one of territory over kinship.

People from Bukor were very disappointed by this and considered Kufen's victory as a betrayal. In fact, it was somehow "decided" by people in Boffa that in 1996, the following year, the Bienvenu Cup had to come back to Boffa. During the first days of the tournament of Kawass, I went to Bukor and attended a night meeting where the *alipne*, together with a group of old women, reassured the rest of the population that the cup was to come to Boffa Prefecture; whether it had to be Bukor itself or any other village in Boffa was of secondary importance (but Bukor was preferable, of course).⁸

Despite their linguistic and other characteristics, the Sitem-speaking Baga from Bukor feel closer to other Baga villages in Boffa (which are not Sitem but Bulongic) than to the rest of the Sitem villages of Boké, while the Baga of Kufen ally themselves with other Sitem of Boké and break links with their brothers from Bukor. This reveals the importance of new territorial policies in the shaping of social identities. The 1996 tournament was also the first time that I heard about the project of making a prefecture out of Kamsar and the Baga villages around it (that is, the Baga Sitem villages in Boké Prefecture). People call it the "Baga Prefecture," although of course if it ever comes into existence it will have to include many people other than the Baga. A meeting to that effect took place among the Baga elites of Conakry a few days before the tournament, but unfortunately I missed it. People in Boké do certainly take advantage of the presence of Kamsar in their prefecture. A new road and a bridge inaugurated in April 1994 have opened up a few villages and made it possible for their inhabitants (especially women selling fruit and rice) to go

⁸ I hasten to say that at the end of the tournament the cup did not "go back" to Boffa but stayed in Boké, since it was won by *Atnt*, a new team composed of Baga boys studying in Kamsar but belonging to other villages.

to Kamsar by a short cheap taxi ride. An important French agricultural project based in Kamsar is now improving the rice fields of the area. Even the twin-engine airplane of the C.B.G. enables a few well-connected Baga people to fly to or from Conakry whenever they want in less than an hour. Boffa's villages, on the other hand, have the feeling of being left out. Their chances to be opened up to external development do not rely on Boké, Kamsar or on projects based in Kamsar, but rather on Boffa's prefectural authorities.

One aspect of this new opposition between villages in Boké and in Boffa prefectures is their respective different constructions of Baga culture. Although they envy the modernising element of Boké, people from Boffa are in fact very proud of being (considered as) more traditional than their Boké neighbours. I think this is what they tried to prove with the rather spectacular carnival in Bukor 1995, which, as I have said, was even filmed, shown on national TV and reported as an example of the "deep *Bagatai*." They consider the carnival of Kawass 1996, with its airplanes and helicopters, as a preposterous travesty, an abandonment of "Baganess." I recall one occasion when I saw a group of people in a Bulongic village refusing to greet some visitors from the region of Boké. That was rather surprising to me, and when I asked why they did not greet their relatives, they answered that those were not their relatives, but *fotei* (white people). It must be remembered that Baga Fore (the Susu word to refer to Bulongic speakers) means in Susu "Black Baga," and that blackness is a mark of pride among the Baga in general. The discourse about blackness intermingles with the discourse about purity. "When the skin of a Baga is clear, his origins are not clear," someone once told me, suggesting that a fair-skinned person would be a descendant of slaves.

As one might expect, people in Boké do not share this view. They do not consider that Bukor or the Bulongic villages of Boffa are better or more "Baga" than themselves, but rather that they have not been successful in eradicating witchcraft and evildoers, that is, the worst aspects of Baga society. It has to be said, in order to contextualize the 1994/1996 local debates I witnessed, that the 1994 cholera

epidemic was devastating in Boffa's villages, especially in Bukor, and the deaths provoked by it, assumed to be due to witchcraft, were also behind the elders' decision to perform the *kinger* during the football tournament. The mere fact that Bukor people still have *alipne* is strongly criticised by people from other villages. For them, and not without reason, *alipne* and witchcraft go hand in glove. In fact, they consider the Baga of Boffa as a whole as the underdeveloped side of the *Bagatai*. "You have to clear that sacred grove in the middle of the village," said Jean Bangoura from Mare to my field assistant Aboubacar Camara (native to Bukor) in 1994. Although the younger Aboubacar showed due respect to his classificatory father Jean by listening to his words without replying, and even agreeing, he later laughed at Jean's admonitions, proud as he felt of being a Baga from Bukor.

It would nonetheless be untrue to say that Baga people from Boké have completely lost interest in their past. Quite the opposite: the "conscious searching for and excavation of the past" characteristic of modern conceptions of tradition (Bausinger 1990:64) is quite a strong feature of some villages of Boké, if still not as strong as it is among other West African ethnic groups. If a visitor (say, an expatriate employee of the C.B.G.) wants to see a Baga masquerade, and if he or she is ready to pay for it, chances are that he or she may get a good one performed by the *troupes de théâtre* installed either in Katako or in Kamsar itself. These will perform either *nimba*, *sibondel* or any other *powolsene* headdress. Yet, these public displays of masks, albeit clearly "folklorised" in the sense discussed above, do not occur as often as one would expect, and certainly not as often as Baga *ressortissants* would like. We have seen that even the carnivals of Mare and Kawass, despite all the efforts and promises, were actually very frustrating in terms of cultural performance. In fact, I believe that the reason why people in Katako created *troupes de théâtre* in the first place was to satisfy Lamp's visual demands in the 1980s, when he was interested in recording certain masquerades. In this sense, it is true, as he claims, that he stimulated a cultural revival. However, once Lamp was gone, the interest in recreating the past decreased enormously. In any case, it is noteworthy that the people in Katako accepted to display masks and dances to a Western audience for no other purpose

than making a film. To make a similar film in Bukor or in a Bulongic village would be much more difficult, since many of the things that can be displayed in Katako belong to a much more secret realm in Bukor.

Indeed, compared with the situation in Boké's villages, the one in Boffa's villages can tell us a great deal about the structures underneath the politics of cultural performances. We have seen that in 1995 in Bukor, the *alipne* were asked to be in charge of the situation by the *ressortissants* and that hence the *alipne* decided what was to be displayed. They allowed the *nimba* and *sibondel* headdresses to be danced, but not the secret *kikenc*. We have also seen that they performed the *kinger*, something they probably would not have done were it not for the importance of the tournament, the pressures from the *ressortissants*, and the rumours in other villages concerning Bukor's witchcraft. We could say that Bukor succeeded in holding a nice tournament because the generational structure allowed for a preparation of the tournament in which the *alipne* made decisions and the youth executed them, very much along the lines on which masquerades were prepared in the days when the *alipne* were young people. For the *ressortissants* it was a successful tournament, leaving of course Kufen's "betrayal" aside. Despite their obvious frustration in not getting a display of the *kikenc*, they nevertheless managed to show Guineans who the real Baga are. But I think that the tournament was an even bigger success for the *alipne*, since they clearly used the situation to reinforce the hierarchical structure that keeps them on top of the village's decision-making. Whether there was "revitalisation" is thus a double-edged question. An observer who would consider revitalisation as a visual display and a return to masquerades would still find that the Bukor tournament was rather poor, with only one *nimba* and one *sibondel*, maybe not even worth the trip down to the village, especially not after the *ressortissants* in Conakry would have told him or her that the villagers were going to perform the *kikenc*. At the same time, at the level of ritual practice, an interesting revitalisation did occur, although at quite a secret level. Indeed, that the *alipne* performed the *kinger* was not something that either the villagers or the *ressortissants* made any boast about, and it was not announced at any official level. It was just a rumour

spreading from village to village, later confirmed to me by one of the *alipne* (Aboubacar's mother's brother) who was also one of my key informants.

Returning to Boké's villages, the generational breach found in them is much deeper. As best exemplified by the Kawass tournament, youth seem to prefer to dance airplanes and helicopters (together with modern African music), escaping from the elders' power and culture, but even in these villages the tendency is to let the elders be in increasing control of the games. If a structural element in Baga history is the appropriation by the youths of the culture of the elders by making "toys" (*powolsene*) out of the elders' secret masks (*molom*), the opposite may also apply. Certainly, the *alipne* of Bukor have domesticated the games and play them according to *their* rules, and the same tendency is observable to a lesser degree in the villages of Boké, where the elders get more and more angry about the bad performance of their juniors in the games.

Having lived in two Baga villages and being annoyed, as most elders are, by the incredible amount of noisy *soirées dansantes* that the youths organise almost every single night during the whole year (dancing to all sorts of modern African and Latino music), I have the feeling that village youths are not very interested in the culture of their elders. In fact, I am rather inclined to believe that they try to get away from it as much as they can, probably as much as their elders were escaping from their seniors when they converted to Islam and cleared the sacred bushes back in 1956-57. Even in the opening of the tournament, I think they look forward much more to the *soirée dansante* at night than to the boring display of masks and players in front of the political representatives in the opening morning, which many of the youths do not attend anyway.

Whether youths succeed in escaping from their elders' control by playing football is a difficult question. During the first years of the tournament the answer would probably have been affirmative. In fact, as elsewhere in the world, many kids saw in football a means to escape from their village and to be promoted to regional and maybe even

national teams (something that, so far, is not happening in the *Bagatai*). But the process as it stands nowadays is that the tournament has become too important an occasion for the whole village to leave it to the youth section of the population. The elders are really behind it, as though it was they who were playing and not the youngsters. In fact, it is they who *are* playing, although certainly not football.

I have heard Baga elders on several occasions say that “the youths are never responsible for a success, but always responsible for a failure.” Interestingly enough, the first time I heard this saying was in a discussion of why sacrifices cannot be made by young people. But I have also heard it in the context of the tournament, where indeed it applies. There is no way the elders are going to say something like “our boys have won the cup.” If the much envied *Coupe Bienvenu* comes to the village it is not due to the boys’ performance in the game, but thanks to the elders’ actions (sacrifices, prayers, witchcraft, etc.). If it does not, then it is because “our kids are lazy and irresponsible and they have not done what we ordered them to do.”

An interesting account of this taking over of control by the elders was given to me by one of my elder male informants in Mare, who suggested that the reason why they (i.e. men) started to care about the football games was the increasing involvement of women in the games:

Women started, especially in Monchon 1993, to perform drummings and dances on the fields, during the matches, behind the goals⁹. Women could not realise that all this is just a game; they are too proud of their children and they would do anything to help them succeed. That’s why we then decided to do something about it.

But this is just a version of the story. As I have said before, in Bukor I was told (by one of the *alipne*, in fact) that the elders decided to take control of the games with

⁹ The final match of the tournament of Monchon in April 1993 was cancelled due to the fears these dances induced in the opposite team. Also in 1994, in Mare on some nights I could see women going to the football pitch to bury secret substances and “prepare the soil” with dances and drumming.

sacrifices and prayers because the whole honour of a village was at stake. Other than a question of women's pride and power and men's pride and power, and beyond the honour of the village, we should see as well other factors: a fight for resources, pressures from the *ressortissants* and, on top of it all, a wonderful occasion for the elders to empower themselves.

Be that as it may, the comparison between the old masquerades (especially *nimba* performances) and football, so insistently reiterated by informants, does take hold. Whenever I got old people to talk to me about the days when they danced the *nimba*, they always insisted that this was a dance for young people, done by young people away from the elders. But then again they admit that they were only able to dance it thanks to the instructions given by the elders and to the sacrifices they made for them. If the young people of today thought they would escape from the elders by playing football and not masks, they were certainly wrong. In fact, the football tournament is reproducing and reifying the very structure they were trying to escape: one that makes the elders decision-makers and sacrificers and youths the more or less irresponsible executors of the decisions made. As for the *ressortissants* in Conakry, if they thought that the football tournament would revitalise the "folkloric" aspect of their culture (masks and dances for a touristic public), they also seem to have got it wrong. If there is a revitalisation, it is a revitalisation of power structures and practices attached to these structures. We have already seen a rise in witchcraft gossip, the reintroduction of the *kɛnger* or "closing of the land," the use of the tournament as a context to discuss the transfer of sacred objects' ownership, and certainly there may be many more things about which I do not know. It is a structure that keeps secret what has to be secret and public what can be public, with the elders in spiritual control of everything. This is exactly as it was when these elders were young and tried to escape from their elders' control by converting to Islam, cutting down their sacred forests and burning their ritual objects in the late fifties.

6.4. *Dikiyefe dabaka*: reconstructing Baga past

In this part of the chapter I want to deal with issues that belong to a rather different domain than those already discussed, but they must be analysed in conjunction with them. While so far we have been discussing the politics behind cultural performances, I want to discuss now the role of historical narratives in the making and reinforcement of a common Baga identity. “*Dikiyefe dabaka*” is a Baga Sitem phrase meaning “the origin of the Baga” (from the verb *kiyefe*: to raise, to come from). The Baga, and especially literate individuals, are fascinated about their unclear origins (“the only thing worth researching” as a Baga intellectual once told me). While I did not become as obsessed as they are with their origins, I found it interesting to connect their historical investigations and interest with the current politics of culture discussed in this chapter.

We have seen that despite their lack of masks and dances in festivals and carnivals, Baga culture is alive and kicking, with the elders of some villages being able to close the land whenever they see fit, and those of other villages discussing who the keeper of *amanco ngopon*’s head must be. But at a discursive level, this is not what “having” a culture is about. I only happen to know these things because a few people decided, after knowing me for about two years, that I should be told a few things in order to have some data to pass my PhD, a worry that was often expressed to me. Many educated Baga think that there is not much of a point in having *amanco ngopon*’s head in the underground basement of a *kilo kipon* (as in Mare), or in a secret grove only to be visited by initiated elders (as in Bukor), and in secretly discussing the transmission of objects while everybody else is watching a game. “What we want” as Aboubacar assertively once told me, “is for the elders to give us *amanco ngopon* so that we can show it to the world.” A Baga intellectual based in Conakry told me that the problem Baga have today is that the elders of the villages do not realise the urgent importance of portraying Baga culture to the world. He was specifically meaning the international audience, since he went on to tell me that only when the world realises that they are a “minority culture” will they receive aid from international organisations in order to develop their region.

In an article on the ownership of the past, Richard Handler has written that the expression “we are a nation because we have a culture,” pronounced by a Quebec high school student, could be substituted by the expression “we are a nation because we have a history” (Handler 1992:63). Although Handler’s focus is on the possessiveness of a nation’s past, his remark is useful to us in that it indirectly emphasises the character of both culture and history as markers of national identity. Indeed, it could be argued that Baga intellectuals, or some of them anyway, realise that since cultural revitalisation is so difficult to obtain and hence their culture so difficult to portray to the world, their best bet is to engage in historical research and writing. In support of this it must be said that the very intellectuals who more actively complain about the lack of a public display of Baga culture are the ones who are most willing to research and produce written accounts of Baga history.

The production of local history among the Baga has always been extraordinarily high and very paradoxical, given the secrecy with which issues of history are dealt with (or, more precisely, not dealt with) in the villages. It is also striking that most Baga historians are individuals who, at the village level, are structurally excluded from secret meetings and decision-making, since they have been outside their villages for most of their lives, including their childhood spent at mission or national schools. The *Mémoires de Diplôme de Fin d’Études Supérieures* (B.A. Dissertations) at both Kankan and Conakry Universities dealing with the Baga and produced by the Baga themselves are more numerous than those about most other ethnic groups, even those much bigger than the Baga (including the Susu and the Malinke). Surprisingly enough, the other ethnic groups that share the highly multi-ethnic Boké Prefecture with the Baga, and who should look equally interesting to historians, linguists or anthropologists (Nalu, Biafada, Landuma, Balanta, etc.), have nevertheless been mostly neglected by Guinean scholars.

In Chapter Two, we have discussed the character of the *Bagatai* as a land of asylum and a frontier on the periphery of the Fulbe Fouta Djallon. We have suggested that the “origins” of the Baga are multiple and that a massive unitary migration from the

hinterland has probably never occurred. However, a multiplicity of origins and a coastal ethnogenesis instead of an ethnic transfer from the hinterland is something that people are not at all ready to accept. If the Baga are one ethnic group, they need one history and one single origin. The Baga have what I would call a historically-oriented identity. To them, questioning their history equals questioning their identity, and therefore research becomes a very delicate endeavour in which it is difficult not to upset anybody, for any attempt to deconstruct Baga ethno-history will be interpreted as a direct attempt to destroy Baga identity, which, however much it may have been Sékou Touré's intention, is certainly not mine.

Neither it is my intention to prove that Baga identity is an urban construction of a few *ressortissants* and their collective history a mere invention of a few intellectuals. It is true that many Baga intellectuals of Conakry are eager to engage in writing the history of their ethnic group¹⁰ and there may be many reasons to explain this. Firstly, they may do it out of a sincere interest in their people and as an outcome of the historically-oriented mind of all the Baga. Secondly, they may be trying to bypass the fact that they are excluded in the village because they were not initiated. Thirdly, they may want to capture national and international audiences and draw their attention towards their culture¹¹. Be that as it may, my suggestion would be that as anthropologists we must not look at this historical production *per se*, but rather at the place it occupies in Baga social life. While I do think that more attention should be paid to the role of intellectuals, which here I only do superficially, I also think that we have to contextualize both the authors and their production if we do not want to be misled and to conclude that Baga identity depends too heavily on the Baga intellectuals. We have already seen that a well-known intellectual opted to remain

¹⁰ Apart from the already written *mémories*, I know of at least four Baga intellectuals who are currently writing the history of the Baga.

¹¹ These "reasons" listed here are just an approximate assessment of a complex problem. I must acknowledge that at no level of my field research did I attempt to find the explanation of why there is such an intellectualisation of Baga culture and that I only started to personally meet the Baga intellectuals at a very late stage of my stay in Guinea.

quiet in the village after promising to read a text on the history of the Baga. This is the kind of situations, I suggest, that we should analyse ethnographically.

For instance, by being my field assistant, Aboubacar Camara learnt quite a bit about his own people, including how to write in Baga by using A.P.A. symbols. When I met him he was a builder with no interest whatsoever in becoming a historian, although he naturally enjoyed explaining things to people. He sent a letter to me a few months ago proudly and gratefully saying that, thanks to me, he is now considered as a good historian among the *ressortissants* of Conakry. Some of them, he says, are even encouraging him to write a book on the history of the Baga. In fact, Aboubacar included in his letter an original essay on the origins of the Baga in which he summarised part of our interviews in a wonderful single narrative. But for me to say now that I have stimulated a historical self-awareness among the Baga would be a bold step to make, at least until I can gauge the influence, if any, of Aboubacar's narratives in the Baga community. Or, to put it in Benedict Anderson's words, it is an open question whether his written production is helping them to imagine themselves as a community. If cultural revitalisation appears to work according to a cultural logic and not only to stimulations by external agents, as we have seen, the same must necessarily apply to historical awareness. To invent a history *ex nihilo* is not a difficult task. To make it credible to the people involved in the history itself requires a structural negotiation between their own agency and the discourse offered by the narrator.

In other words, I do not believe that a mere invention of a *ressortissant* would be accepted by the villagers were it not to be congruent, to a significant extent, with their own experiences and feelings. New things, either the modernity of Kamsar or the narratives of intellectuals, need to make sense in order to be accepted by people and they only make sense if they help them to understand their lived world and their place in it. If there is a cultural logic that regulates what aspects of the modern world can be taken up and what aspects must be rejected, there is also a cultural logic that

regulates what and whose narratives about the Baga make sense to the Baga and what and whose narratives are meaningless.

To illustrate the points made so far, I am going to discuss the way in which Baga history is collectively constructed and presented, and the role of feedback among informants and researchers that takes place in this collective construction.

6.4.1. On the origins of the Baga in the Fouta Djallon

As we have seen in Chapter Two, the actual presence of the Baga people in the Fouta, today or before, is a very debatable question. I have not carried out fieldwork in the Fouta itself, but researchers I know of who not only have done oral history on the spot, but have also consulted all the available archives, both French and Fulbe, claim that evidence of a Baga presence is scant or non-existent (Botte, p.c.). I was told by an old Fulbe man who had been the last canton chief in Timbo that the Baga were the inhabitants of the Fouta prior to the arrival of the Fulbe, but since this is a conventional story in Guinea, it would be difficult to know whether he knew it from any historical evidence or just from common Guinean knowledge. Another Fulbe man I consulted, much younger but very well informed, told me that the original inhabitants of the Fouta were the Jalonka. When I asked him about the Baga, he told me he knew that the Baga were said to be the original inhabitants of the Fouta because “that is what we are told at school.” Before I, or somebody else, carries out any specific fieldwork on that topic in the Fouta itself, nothing can be concluded about the Baga presence in the highlands.

No matter how scant the data on the Fouta may be, the truth is that once among the Baga, Fouta origins are an important element of their Baganess, especially amongst the oldest informants. The problem is that the nature of the link is not easy to establish today. Most of the old informants who still insist on the Fouta origins of the Baga are Muslims and therefore, no matter how much they may hate the Fulbe, they do have a high respect for the Fouta as a centre of Islamic scholarship. For instance, in his thesis on the Baga, Stéphan Bouju claims that: “Sébè Labé was the point of departure of the

ancestors of the Baga Sitem who live today in Katako, Mare, Kakilinsi [Kakilenc], Kamsar, Missira, and Taïdi [Tolkoc]" (Bouju 1994, vol I:140; my translation). But strictly speaking, such a place as Sébè Labé does not exist. Labé of course does exist; it is the biggest administrative capital of the Fouta today. *Sébè* is a verb meaning "to write" (i.e.: the Koran) and wherever Bouju gathered this narrative, he should have realised that it was already biased by a Muslim appreciation of the Fouta.¹² I was told, incidentally, that *Sébè Labé* was an important element of the initiation rituals of the Baga Sitem, somewhat related to the figure of *amanco ngopon*, thus mixing a "pagan" with a Muslim notion of secrecy and power. (See Chapter Two for the relationship between provinces and specific Muslim centres of the Fouta.)

The problem is that most researchers dealing with the slippery topic of Baga "origins" attempt to create a coherent narrative out of the rather chaotic and fragmentary descriptions they are given in the field, instead of contextualizing the way in which informants make their accounts. In fact, informants tend to disappear and one never knows whether he/she was a Muslim, a Christian, an old person, a young one, etc., while in fact these are crucial elements in order to contextualize the narratives given. Some authors are already given highly coherent narratives that the villagers have created out of their own cultural knowledge, although they never check out how this knowledge has been constructed. Once a coherent narrative is reached, it creates an authority for informants or researchers to refer to. For instance, in a seminal article Claude Rivière wrote in 1967 we read:

Well before the formation of the empire of Timbo in 1813, the Baga had left Labé, Fougoumba, and Binani without leaving any family alliances, but this migration of extended families (Baga Mandori, Baga Fore, Baga Sitem, Baga Koba, Baga Kalum) did certainly not happen at the same time (...). One can conjecture that the Baga, when they were installed at the centre of the highlands of the Fouta Djallon, gave way to Mandingo invaders and looked for refuge in the coastal lands among the tidal creeks and among the impenetrable mangrove,

¹² I suspect that Bouju obtained this particular narrative from a written account and not from a direct oral source, since it coincides word by word with the narrative given in *Patme*, the collective work edited by Mohammed Bangoura (Bangoura [ed.] nd.: 8), a monograph that, in its turn, heavily relies on previous written accounts.

where they learned how to make a profit by clearing out the forest and building protective dikes. The Baga claim to be the legitimate owners of the land because they are convinced that their ancestors were its first inhabitants and the first people to clear it. (Rivière 1967:439; my translation).

Now the interesting thing about this text is that while Rivière does not quote his sources about the leaving of the Baga from Labé, Fougoumba or Binani, he himself has become an authority on the matter, this very paragraph being quoted in at least five or six of the most influential works on the Baga written by Guinean researchers as evidence of the Fouta origins of the Baga (cf. Diop 1966: 8; Diallo 1974: 18; Tyam 1975: 9; Sankhon 1987: 2; Bangoura, ed, nd.: 9; and probably others).

6.4.2. The murder of Nuno Tristao

The feedback of literate knowledge makes research on historical matters particularly difficult. As I have said, the Baga have been the object of many dissertations by university students. These studies were partially done in the field and partially done in Conakry. In fact, they rely heavily upon each other, and even foreign scholars normally use these dissertations, at least to get some first insights into Baga culture. No matter how the information offered in these dissertations was acquired, the fact is that it becomes important knowledge for the Baga themselves and it affects the views that they have of themselves, even in the villages. It would be wrong to assume that, because they are illiterate, they do not know the content of their fellows' dissertations in Conakry. The transfer of knowledge is a two-way process between villagers and intellectuals.

This is of course not unique to the Baga. The feedback in oral narratives is a common topic in African historiography, already pointed out by MacGaffey (1970) and by David Henige (Henige 1973), and more recently discussed by Adam Jones and Carola Lenz

(Jones 1991, Lentz 1994).¹³ What may be unique among the Baga is the surprising number of intellectuals willing to write the history of their ethnic group.

The most striking example of feedback between literate sources and oral accounts that I encountered had to do with the death of the 15th century Portuguese navigator Nuno Tristao. Over the last hundred years, it has been a common mistake for people working on the coast of Guinea to assume that Nuno Tristao was killed by the inhabitants of the Rio Nuñez, where the Baga live. The killing of Tristao in Africa is recorded in 15th century sources, but nowhere is it said that it happened in the Rio Nuñez (or Rio Nunes, as Portuguese texts have it). Yet, I was told by Baga informants in two different Baga villages that Tristao was killed by the Baga of the village of Tolkoc, who, not being accustomed to seeing white people, thought he was an evil spirit and decided to kill him. Some informants in Mare even told me, with high accuracy, that that happened in 1447. (NB: That the first white person to ever visit the Baga was killed by them thinking it was an evil spirit is very often reported, even by informants who clearly do not know who Nuno Tristao was; maybe it is true?).

I do not know who the first to suggest (wrongly) that Tristao had died in the Rio Nuñez was (in fact he died much farther north, hundreds of kilometres away from the Rio Nuñez). But I do know that the first to suggest that *the Baga* had killed him was the prolific missionary Raymond Lerouge. In 1939, Lerouge published an article in *La Voix de Notre-Dame* arguing that Nuno Tristao had been killed in the Nuñez and inferring, from a “close” reading of Eanes de Azurara’s 15th century chronicles, that his killers had to be the Baga of Tolkoc (Lerouge 1939). Given the fact that the region of the Nuñez is so highly multi-ethnic, Lerouge’s “deduction” is interesting. As we have seen in Chapter Four, the Baga were reported by the French to be “anarchic,” “backwards,” etc., and certainly they were more elusive and reluctant to accept the authority of the French than other groups in the region. As I have argued in Chapter Two, this image of

¹³ Before these Africanist scholars took it into account, the role of feedback (*Rücklauf*) between cultural performances and scholars’ interpretations of them had been a privileged topic of research by German folklorists in the 1940s and 1950s (Bendix 1988).

elusiveness is not only the outcome of a more or less passive hiding in the mangroves, but also part of a stereotype that the Baga have carefully and consciously created over the centuries. We have already seen in Chapter Four that in 1936, two years before Raymond Lerouge wrote his article, the Baga, after making an oath to *amanco ngopon*, attempted to murder the first canton chief (*Almami* Sidi). For different reasons they chose Tolkoc as the village where the murder was to be attempted. It is very likely that this event influenced Lerouge's guess that Tolkoc was the village where the Baga had killed Nuno Tristao. Certainly, the two events have a similar structure, and the two are very congruent with the elusiveness and the almost legendary refusal of the Baga to be ruled by foreigners. In other words, the killing of Tristao, even if blatantly false, is congruent with the image of themselves that they want to believe in and that they want to portray.

Tristao's murder is not only a rumour. It is actually taught at the local secondary school, where three of the teachers are Baga. One of them in particular is an interesting character. He was often pointed out to me as someone who "really knows." "If you want to know our 'secrets', go to see him, but do not tell him I told you to go," a man from Mare once told me. What I did not know by then was that his "secret" knowledge consists of having precious texts and sketches of Baga masks done by missionaries and native priests. In fact, I suspect that he has the twelve missing notebooks of Lerouge, who used to keep a day-to-day journal (see Chapter One). In one of them (certainly not in any of the ones kept at his archives in France) he sketched the awesome *amanco ngopon*, as he explained in a published article (Lerouge 1935). Today nobody can see *amanco ngopon*, since his masquerades ceased in the 1950s and he was far too big to be kept in a single house. But I was told that people do go to the house of this secondary school teacher to see what the *amanco ngopon* looked like, and I do have the strong suspicion that he actually keeps Lerouge's missing notebooks together with other missionaries' documents. Whatever the case may be, what is surprising is the aura of secret power that this possession has awarded him. In fact, while I am reluctant to accept that secret knowledge can be compared with a library, the fact is that in this case

at least, secret knowledge does consist of a secret library containing the “secrets” of the Baga written and sketched by a French missionary.

6.4.3. From beyond the Fouta

In 1994, I was told by a young Christian in Mare that he did not believe that the Baga came from the Fouta Djallon highlands, “as the elders say,” but rather that the Baga must have come from Egypt. He supported his view with the fact that both the Baga and the ancient Egyptian word for tomb is *kufu* (pl. *cufu*), which he had read in a book. Only he had not read the book himself, but a friend of his had. But as it often happens, knowledge gets distorted when one reports what others read. In fact, *kufu* does not mean “tomb” in ancient Egyptian, but is rather the name of a pharaoh (Khufu). But the story that the word for “tomb” in Egyptian is the same as in Baga is a common mistake, and I later heard it in different places. I finally found out that this misconception had been spread by a well-read Baga man based in Conakry who has a private library containing German books on Egyptian history, where *he* read about Khufu. It was disseminated *malgré lui*. He is in fact a very careful scholar who always insists that his ideas are hypotheses and so far does not want to make his research available to anybody. Unfortunately, he is not in full control of his knowledge. Not only his relatives spread in the villages what they may hear at his home in Conakry, but one of them in particular stole his ideas and published a rather fanciful article about the Mesopotamian origins of the Baga (Bangoura 1989).

6.4.4. Interpretations of history and identity

This continuous feedback can tell us a lot about the role of history (“history” as a discipline, rather than a succession of events) in the making of collective identities. Adam Jones has written that “history does not exist *per se*, but only in response to the questions which appear relevant at a given time (...) All that we are capable of doing when we record an oral tradition is to ‘freeze’ the historical *interpretations* of a few individuals at a particular time.” (Jones 1993:35).

Indeed, are we not freezing old informants' interpretations of their particular times when we are so uncritically reproducing once and again that the Baga origins are in the Fouta? The elders who claim so are probably reminiscing of the days when the Fouta was a prestigious Muslim centre on which the Baga periphery depended and probably, as allusions to *Sébè Labé* and other hints may suggest, there was a link between the Fouta Jaloo state and specific spirit provinces of the Baga (see Chapter Two). But to younger Baga in contemporary Guinea such origins are bound to be meaningless. They feel that historical horizons must be broadened as their own experience of the world is also expanded. Today the Baga do not come from the Fouta, but from Niger, from Ethiopia, from Egypt or from Mesopotamia. The exact origin is unclear to them, but most of them know that wherever they started, they started together. They are as Baga today as they were when they were in Egypt or elsewhere.

Despite my description of their identity as a historically-oriented one, I do not think that the Baga *know* their past very well. As for the statements of some youths who claim that their elders do know the history of the Baga very well, that such a history is only told in the sacred bush, I have my reservations. I do not think that the sacred bush can be conceived of as a library where objective, fact-based knowledge is consultable (although sometimes, as in the case of the secondary school teacher mentioned above, secret knowledge may exist in a hidden library). Certainly, the initiated elders know more than the youths about origins of lineages in the villages and hierarchies among them, but I doubt that they discuss issues of the distant past, either about their fights against the Fulbe or about anything prior to their arrival in the Fouta¹⁴. If this were so,

¹⁴ Pierre Bangoura, an old Christian man from Mare, once told me that before the Fouta, the Baga were in Lagos and in Ethiopia. When I asked him about Lagos, he said he did not know where that was. But the late Jacob Camara, a young man who was listening to the interview, clarified that "Lagos is what you call Yugoslavia." The elder replied with the customary agreement formula: "*yati!*" Albeit a mere anecdote, this instance illustrates the way in which narratives are socially constructed. We often assume that elders do not listen to younger fellows or vice versa, but the truth is that filtrations must occur. In this particular case, the elder probably thought that Jacob, being at school, was making a relevant precision about the exact location of Lagos in the world, while the *yati!* of the elder probably ratified to Jacob that his observation was right. It was not only the interruption of an established narrative but the making of a new one.

feedback would be impossible, for how could the knowledge learnt by non-initiated intellectuals or Catholic students be introduced in the chain of knowledge of initiated elders if the latter truly had access to a privileged source of knowledge in the bush? If there is a feedback, it is because knowledge about the Baga *as an ethnic group* is unclear, and all are eager to learn. I personally am more fascinated about this eagerness to learn about themselves than about the specific knowledge itself. For what this eagerness tells me is that despite their various origins, despite their linguistic diversity, despite their religious divisions and despite the administrative policies that tend to separate them, their historical experience tells them that survival is only possible if they see themselves as a group and if they portray themselves as such. This cohesiveness has protected them in the past and they feel it is going to help them be a part of the modern world.

6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter we have analysed different aspects of the politics of Baga culture in today's Guinea. On the one hand, we have seen the efforts of some part of the population to display their culture, and how these efforts are often frustrated because cultural displays must follow a logic that strongly differentiates the realm of the secret from the realm of the public, especially at the village level. On the other hand, we have seen that the difficulty to *display* culture is accompanied by an engagement of intellectuals in *writing* Baga history. I think that today Baga identity lies in a difficult equilibrium between the secrecy that prevails at the village level and the need to announce and to display a Baga culture in Guinea's multi-ethnic political arena. But even in this current condition Baga society presents a structural continuity with its own history. In the past, as well (we have seen this in previous chapters), for the Baga to exist in the multi-ethnic Guinean coast they needed a high degree of secrecy combined with a high degree of stereotypical projection. I will comment on this historical continuity in the next chapter, as well as on the importance of researchers in stimulating self-conscious activities, be they cultural performances or historical narratives.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: "Salt and rice," or being Baga through time

7.1. Introduction

I started the thesis by situating the Baga groups in the mangroves where they live today, and by arguing that a Baga ethnogenesis happened on the coast and not in distant hinterlands, as had been previously argued. Today the Baga are fragmented in many subgroups, many of them reduced, by different historical means, to the ashes of memory. Although local people and some researchers insist on the "ethnic" unity of the Baga subgroups in the past, by analysing different historical sources I have put forward the hypothesis that in the past "Baga" was very much what E. Ardener (1972) called a "hollow category," an occupational label applied to different peoples living on the Guinean coast. The "people of the sea" (assuming this is the right etymology of the word *abaka*) living in the mangroves were (and to a certain extent *are*) more a *groupe technique* than a *groupe ethnique*, to use A. Leroi-Gourham's useful distinction. Yet the same examination has proved to us that the fact that these people called the "Baga" were all "pagan", were all living on the periphery of the Fouta Djallon Fulbe state and were specialised in the same practices gave rise to a sense of common identity, very much expressed first and foremost in terms of an explicit opposition to Fulbe pressure. By showing different examples of a reified "inversion of tradition" between the Baga and the Fulbe, I not only wanted to contest the claims that there is an ahistorical essence that has been moving along the African landscape, I also wanted to understand why the Baga of the so-called *Bagatai*, a small reduct by comparison with the whole ancient Baga coastal lands, are said to represent best the Baga of the past, and whether they represent them at all.

In Chapter Three I penetrated this *Bagatai* in order to analyse the structure of Baga society and some of the societal models used by both scholars and Baga alike. My aim was to elucidate the structure underneath the historical continuity and the conflict. Therefore issues of seniority, slavery and hierarchy have been given a special attention.

These issues provide a platform to discuss the historical events analysed in the following chapters.

In Chapters Four and Five I have analysed the colonial situation in order to provide background to the politics of a Muslim iconoclast movement that happened in 1957, when the Muslim leader Asekou Sayon started a *jihad* against the “pagan” elements of Baga society. This event, whose generational, religious and political dimensions have been discussed, is seen today as a transformation in which the Baga (willingly or unwillingly, depending on the speaker’s convictions) “broke” with their past. This movement is mentioned in every work on the Baga, normally portrayed as the point in time in which the Baga abandoned their “culture” (the very culture they have to reconstruct today, according to some). I have argued that to insist on its destructive aspects is very problematic. Not only because there are many more aspects to this iconoclast rebellion than meet the eye, but also because in doing so we are basing our analysis on heavily reified notions of Baga culture, and therefore neglecting other aspects of Baga social life that can be considered equally as part of their culture (precisely those that make it possible for historical continuities to occur). I have singled out the generational dimensions and the agency of political parties behind the movement, which allow us to see this religious movement as a key element towards the incorporation of the Baga into the post-colonial Guinean state. A state that was shaped, probably more so than other ones, by a strong anti-particularist policy as well as a by a “cultural revolution” programme that made it impossible for anyone to continue boasting of any “pagan” identity. Even being Christian, a very conspicuous religious identity among the Baga in colonial times, became very problematic. In this sense, because initiations were no longer practised since the onset of the Republic, the 1956/57 Islamist movement can be considered as indeed a rupture in Baga history, and one that is especially felt today, since many of today’s elders had been initiated before 1956 and none of the youths have. This adds a cultural dimension to the current generational conflict (a conflict that, cultural contents aside, is in fact not very different to the one of 1956/57).

In Chapter Six I moved from historical reconstructions to a description of my ethnographic present in democratising Guinea. I have focused on some cultural processes (football matches, cultural performances) in order to understand the politics of Baga identity in Guinea today and to offer a somewhat different view on the results of historical events to those offered by the “revitalisation” views of Lamp. I have analysed age dynamics, trying to contextualize them in broader debates about culture and identity. I have also analysed the role of Baga *ressortissants* in encouraging cultural performances and in defining a geopolitical Baga unit. As opposed to culturalist approaches, such as Lamp’s, I have argued that more than a “reconstruction” of an objectified culture, what I observed was the continuity of more hidden but equally “cultural” practices. At the same time, by comparing different tournaments in different regions, I have shown that the organisation of these tournaments brings to light internal debates about what Baganess should be about. From this we can separate those who stick to the “deep rural” mangrove definition (such as the Baga Fore, or the Baga Sitem of Bukor) from those who, especially because of the proximity of Kamsar, are eager to engage with modernity and to combine it with their Baganess. This embracing of modernity does not come without contradiction and without being accused of becoming “*Baga Foté*.” The second part of the chapter was especially oriented to the role of literacy and to the engagement of Baga intellectuals in writing their own history. I come back to this point below.

7.2. The Baga in the Fouta: An anecdote

Before I go on to single out what I consider the specific implications of my thesis, I would like to end this résumé with an experiment I unwillingly conducted in my last visit to Guinea in April-May 1997. Aboubacar Camara and I went to Téliimélé, in the pre-Fouta Djallon highlands, in order to interview four *nyamankalaw* (low “caste” specialised in public entertainment) of the Fulbe that my colleague Roger Botte had met some years ago. According to what they had said to him, these people could be of Baga descent. The research was not well conducted, as I was most unfamiliar with the region and was forced to do things I would not do in the coastal regions, such as

interviewing the men in the presence of the *sub-préfet* and other local members of the civil service. In any case, two of the four men we met denied ever having said that they were Baga to Botte. Only two of them admitted having said so and repeated to me that, according to what they had heard from their elders, their ancestors were Baga; not Baga of Fouta, they clarified, but rather Baga from the coast either sold to or captured by the Fulbe. Aboubacar told me he thought that this could well apply to the other two as well.

Whatever the case may be, our fieldwork created expectations among the Baga (both among the *ressortissants* and among the villagers) because people thought we would find a “proof” that the Baga were the ancient inhabitants of Fouta Djallon, which we did not. Yet, when we came back and told them that we had spotted a few elderly men in Fouta who claimed to be slaves (of the Fulbe) of Baga origin they did not accept it. In fact, it was when discussing my findings with a literate man in Conakry that I got the most astonishing revelation about the historical importance of being Baga, almost their very “secret.” “These people” he said, “cannot be Baga, because what makes us be the Baga is the fact that we have never been enslaved”. Another one told me that the Baga have never been taken away from the coast. And in my village, my adoptive father Arafan Bangoura simply and similarly told me “if these people you have found up there *are* slaves, they *cannot* be Baga”. The information I provided was simply not accepted, and I might say that it was not accepted on pure logical grounds: If A, then not B. According to the Baga, I had been fooled by my Fouta Djallon informants (which I must admit is possible).

Needless to say, these reactions were in themselves more interesting than the short conversations with the *nyamankalaw*. Not only did they prove to me, once again, that according to Baga logics the concepts of *wibaka* (Baga) and *wicar* (slave) are mutually incompatible (i.e., that a Baga *cannot* be a slave), but they also proved that the Baga are extremely careful in defining who is and who is not a Baga and in manipulating people’s perceptions of it.

I think that this ethnographic episode encapsulates many elements of Baga identity discussed in the thesis, and that I am going to discuss briefly, together with some others that may not be obvious in the anecdote. First, we have the question of cultural stereotypes, in which the anecdote links issues already discussed in Chapter Two; second, the question of ethnic boundaries, i.e. of who is and who is not a Baga; third, the role of feedback in defining Baga identity and in aiding the researcher to analyse the cultural logics, which will lead us to the fourth point of considering what exactly being Baga is all about; fifth, the historical importance of being a mangrove people “not taken away from the coast”; sixth, the difficulties in defining what exactly “Baga culture” is and the need to look at different areas of practice and discourse in order to explore it.

7.3. The tenacity of ethnic stereotypes

As the reaction of my informants can show, the “stereotype” of the Baga as the people who have had nothing to do with slavery appears to die hard. For instance, all John Iliffe has to say about them in a recent book on African history is that “the Baga (...) refused to participate in the slave trade throughout its history” (Iliffe 1995:126). Many Baga would be thrilled to know that this is what is considered most important about them, the only thing worth noticing about their role (or non-role) in West African history. But the statement needs to be qualified. To me, it is obvious that to have such a reputation on a coastal region that has been particularly infamous for its strong activity in the trade is not an “accident” that has just “happened to” the Baga. It has been a long “cultural work,” to use John Peel’s apt phrase (Peel 1989), and at times quite a self-conscious one. Whatever “Baga” means, there is a constant Baga agency that controls both the meanings and the range of individuals upon whom it may be predicated. In the past, this agency had initiation rituals as its chief instrument; today the instruments of ethnic definition appear to be different: historical narratives, football tournaments, cultural performances. The range is not necessarily clear to all, and boundaries may be blurred but to researchers who argue that ethnic boundaries are only perceived and/or created by external agencies, the Baga would tell that their boundaries and definition are, have been and will be their own business.

7.4. Ethnic boundaries: Identity, cultural practices and territory

The biggest problem with Iliffe's statement as well as with my informants' responses quoted above as to the non-slavery of Baga is not whether these statements are "true" or "false". The biggest problem is to establish to whom they are applicable. We have seen that "Baga", especially in pre-colonial times (the times Iliffe is obviously referring to), was a label used to refer to many peoples living along the Guinean coast from the Rio-Núñez to Kalum and probably beyond. Certainly, the groups that lived close to Conakry and to Boffa (Baga Koba, Baga Kakissa) would have had a difficult case to make were they to prove their non-collaboration in the slave trade (as Mouser has proved). I think most Guinean readers today would immediately recognise that what John Iliffe is saying about the Baga is only applicable, if at all, to the peoples living in the area of Boffa and Boké, in the geographically delimited *Bagatai*. Historically, they seem to have been more mangrove oriented than other groups and to have been less involved in slave trade. The problems, from an historical and an anthropological point of view, are: What has allowed these people to continue being Baga? And to what extent can we think that they represent the Baga of the past?

It seems to me that the Baga of today living in the *Bagatai* present themselves as the logical heirs to the Baga of the past. They claim that in the past the whole coast was doing what they are doing today, i.e. growing mangrove rice with their characteristic *kop* (Figs. 1 and 2), extracting salt, drinking palm wine, etc. This in a hypothesis we cannot rule out. It is only logical to think that if the whole coast was populated by different "Baga" groups, they had to share a great deal of features (occupational, linguistic) to be called the same. But to project the meanings of Baga of today onto the past is risky. It is interesting in itself that the Baga consider the *kop* as co-substantial to their ethnic being, but we have to be careful before projecting this onto the past (some Baga are even convinced that they were using the *kop* when they were living in the Fouta Djallon, which of course is illogical as the *kop* is only to be used in mangrove).

Instead of imagining a whole coast of “Baga” people and a history of an increasing abandonment or loss of “Baganess” that would make the Baga Sitem, Bulongic and Pukur of today the untouched fossil of an erstwhile bigger group, we can see the Baga of today as the result of a series of unique processes. In these processes they have been both the outcome of a history and the agents of it, and as shown in their current reaction to my insinuations that they had been taken away from the coast as slaves, they have been very careful in manipulating their stereotypes. The men that Aboubacar and I met in the Fouta were non-Baga not (or not only) because they could not be descendants of the free Baga people living safely in the mangroves, but, more importantly, because the Baga who do live today in the mangroves would not recognise them as such.

7.5. On feedback between sources and narratives

In the last chapter we have been looking at different degrees and examples of feedback between the written and the oral and between intellectual *ressortissants* and local villagers. I have been arguing that feedback is not a process by which external elements get introduced in the oral everyday life at random, but rather that there must be a cultural logic that regulates what can and what cannot be incorporated through feedback. In fact, while several authors consider feedback as a “problem” (Henige 1973), like the bathwater we have to detect and throw away without throwing the baby (the baby being the “pure” oral tradition passing down from generation to generation), I think that a more constructive approach would be to consider feedback as primarily one more element in the very complex mechanisms by which a people think of themselves as such. Let us consider the case of the murder of the first white man ever to reach Guinea, the Portuguese navigator Nuno Tristao, in 1446. We know that the killing of Tristao by the Baga Sitem of Tolkoc, today even taught at local secondary schools, was invented by Raymond Lerouge, a Catholic missionary and an amateur historian. But we also know that the Baga always insist that they killed the first white man to visit their villages, and we also know that in Tolkoc, only two years before Lerouge wrote his article, the Baga attempted to murder their canton

chief, the Fulbe *Almami* Sidi. We can say that Lerouge's invention makes "genuine contact with people's actual experience, that is with a history that happened" which, as John Peel has argued, is a condition for any intellectual fabrication by "ethnic missionaries" to raise historical consciousness amongst local people (Peel 1989:200). We know that the Baga did not kill Tristao in 1446, but we know that this killing is congruent with their historical experiences and with the way Baga people want to portray themselves.

To the willingness with which the Baga accepted the responsibility of Nuno Tristao's murder (making an anti-hero out of him), we can contrast their unwillingness to accept what I had to tell them about themselves, namely that some of their ancestors had been sold to the Fulbe. Indeed, this would be contrary to any idea that they have about themselves, or at any rate to any idea they want strangers to have about them.

The existence of these collective logics that regulate what can and what cannot be said about the Baga is going to shape the future of Baga scholarship, either written by the Baga or external researchers. At the end of his book on Baga art, Frederick Lamp says:

In producing the first monograph on the Baga and thereby making known the unknown, I am reminded of the words (...) written by William Fagg (...): "The Baga ... must be accounted one of the most important and at the same time obscure [people]." This obscurity served the Baga well, in both internal and external terms. On the one hand, it enabled them to maintain their insularity against larger, more powerful African groups, through the terrifying mystique of the spiritual unknown. On the other end of the history of their art, the mystery that has surrounded the entire Baga corpus of works has set the Baga apart from such groups as the Dogon or the Yoruba (...). With this book, I make the choice to end the mystery in part, and it is a choice made ambivalently. With it, the Baga, and their art, can never be the same. (Lamp 1996:256).

Lamp's ambivalent feelings in making public the history of the Baga may be justified, and he is right in being aware of the inevitable feedback that his book is going to experience. But whether his book is going to have the "enlightenment"

effect of ending Baga mystery is not only hard to foretell, but to me even hard to believe. "Mystery" has also its own logic, and one that proves rather difficult to obliterate. If 1950's Muslim iconoclasm, Sékou Touré's repressive politics, and the modernity of Kamsar have not put an end to the beliefs in the "mysterious" powers by which the Baga are known in Guinea ("*un peuple mystérieux*" is quite a common way to refer to them) I do not think that Western scholarship will do it. In many ways, Lamp's videos and illustrated books may actually help to reinforce them. Yet it is true that Baga identity as we know it has always required a great deal of notions of secrecy, and in this sense it will be interesting to see how the public spread of their visual culture is going to intermingle with local notions of secrecy. But we also have to take into consideration that this intermingling is not new. It is my contention that Baga art was meant to be visible, not only for themselves but to outsiders as well (why, if not, would they have the biggest African masks -*nimba*, *amanco ngopon*-known to us?), and one could argue that Lamp's pictures are going to do today what the actual objects were once supposed to do: namely, to portray to *others* how terrifying *our* "mystique" is.

Of course I am only speculating. All I mean is that people have their own way to interpret things and, despite our ethnographic insights, it is very difficult for either Lamp or me (or any one else) to predict how our scholarship is going to be interpreted and indigenised. We do not have to go all the way along the slippery path of hermeneutics to agree that interpretations are culturally dependant and that it is a condition of human existence to interpret things from the constrictions of a "finite tradition" (for the relationship between hermeneutics and anthropology, see Ulin 1984, *passim*). To put it in more anthropological terms, the Baga will interpret our work according to their own cultural logic, not ours. As to whether or not they will continue to be "the same," it is an unnecessary worry. In fact, whether a given social change represents the continuity of "sameness" or the introduction of "difference" depends very much on our point of view, and more often than not both can be predicated by different observers. I personally think, and I hope this was clear in my analysis of the football tournament, that societies have a strong *conatus* to reproduce

sameness rather than to accept *difference* and I would say (even if some Baga do not agree with me) that even for the Baga close to the Western site of Kamsar, their impulse, as Sahlins said concerning the Fijians, is “not to become just like us but more like themselves” (Sahlins 1994:388).

7.6. On “Baganess”: Tissue or discourse?

Let me pursue these related topics of identity and feedback. As the reader will recall, at the beginning of my fieldwork I used to get most irritant answers to my nosy ethnographic questions. On several occasions, in particular, I was told that I would never know what “Baga” means because that was their “*secret*.” First I just took this statement as an euphemistic threat, as a way to let me know that they would not let me know anything. But when I started to understand notions of secrecy I realized that in fact Baga have quite a substantial view about it. Although there was an element of threat in their statements, I also think they literally meant that the meaning of Baga is not to be intellectually apprehended, but belongs to the very tissue of their existence. Elderly informants always insisted on the connection between the meaning of “Baga” and initiation, and initiation was a process in which people ate *molom*, the word normally translated as “secrets”. The “eating of *molom*” (*kidi molom*), as “initiation” is referred to in Baga Sitem, is conceived of more as a process of bodily experiences and transformation than as a process of intellectual learning, despite the fact that educated Baga sometimes express the opposite by comparing their sacred bushes to schools or libraries.¹

Thus, it is safe to say that Baga identity is made up of secrets (*molom*). To the notion of a “pure” Baga who has eaten all the *molom*, two main modes of foreign-ness are opposed: being *white* (whether Nuno Tristao at the mythical level or an

¹ I do not mean that there is no transmission of knowledge or no secret knowledge (medical, etc.). There is such a knowledge, but I do not believe that this was passed down in initiation rituals. Rather, I think that having been initiated was but a condition to be taught, in later stages, specific knowledge.

anthropologist unable to understand the meaning of Baga at the real one²) and being *slave*. Both modes of foreign-ness are a lack or a loss of substance (this is intermingled with notions of darkness; fair skinned Bagas are not as “pure” as dark skinned ones). If the notion of a “slave Baga” would be an oxymoron to most Baga ears, so would the notion of a “white Baga”. Yet, very significantly, this very expression, particularly in Susu (*Baga Foté*), is often used to refer to the Baga groups that are perceived as being less Baga, such as the Baga Kalum or the Baga Koba (contaminated, as it were, by their proximity to white people and to slave trade). It seems that the Baga Sitem and the Baga Foré (a Susu phrase meaning, quite redundantly, “Black Baga”) are today the “real” Baga, and they like themselves and outsiders to remember this.

Today, since initiations no longer exist, there seems to be a general move from “eating secrets” to reading books. In 1996, for instance, when the opening of the Baga football tournament of Kamsar was supposed to be accompanied by a “traditional” masquerade, the cultural performance mainly consisted instead in the reading of a long text on the history of the village written by a secondary school teacher. Contrary to what we could think, the disappearance of initiation rituals does not mean that Baga have lost control in defining their ethnic identity and boundaries. The means of control have changed, that is all.

Yet, as I have already suggested, to remain in Conakry and to look at the intellectuals’ productions without looking at the logics of reception of their potential consumers would lead to a misunderstanding of Baga culture. At the local level, indigenous, *centripetal* notions about the tissue of Baga being made up of “secrets” must come to terms with the increasing engagement of Baga intellectuals and writers to *centrifugally* publicise their culture. The link between literacy and secrecy is the way in which the written history is often “secretised” by key villagers. This is the case, for instance, of the charismatic E. Camara, the secondary school teacher who keeps the texts written by

² I am aware that the two levels are interrelated. Maybe the reason why they enjoyed telling me about the killing of Nuno Tristao (or of any other first white man) was to let me know euphemistically that despite all the idioms of “adoption,” I was not and would not be perceived as “one of them.”

missionaries containing drawings of *amanco ngopon* and other “secrets” (mostly masks, from what I know) and controls who is and who is not to be allowed to see them (and the anthropologist, as a complete stranger, was *not* to be allowed to see them). Structurally speaking, E. Camara is an anti-interpreter. If the role of the ethnographic interpreter (say, Aboubacar) is to translate to us what local people say (or more often, do) in our own terms, the role of E. Camara seems to be to translate into local practices and language what we are doing and saying about them. In reality, though, the antagonism I detected was not between E. Camara and Aboubacar, who went on rather smoothly, but between E. Camara and the Conakry intellectual *ressortissants*. While the latter were eager to have access to his source of knowledge, he denied such access to them arguing that they were not qualified to talk about things they do not know, since most of them, if not all, were non-initiated and did not know much about village life.

I do not know in what ways the written word is going to affect the Baga, but I know that the dialectics between secrecy and literacy, between oral tradition and written sources is going to be a vital element of their culture in the future.

7.7. “Deep ruralness” and peripheralisation

The proud claim that the Baga have “never been taken away from the coast,” present in my informants’ reactions, leads me to an important dimension of my thesis. In my semi-historical Chapter Two I argued that Baga ethnogenesis happened on the coast, that the Baga are a coastal group living in the mangroves on the periphery of the pre-colonial Fouta Djallon state. I argued that both the Fulbe pressure from the hinterland and the ecosystem where the Baga live, which is perceived by them as having “protected” them against the Fulbe and other enemies, are crucial elements in order to understand their cultural identity. I also argued that this identity gave a cultural stereotype that portrayed the Baga as a deep mangrove people, to adapt Murray Last’s “deep rural” concept, which I think applies to groups on the periphery of the Fouta Djallon (see Fanthorpe 1998 for an excellent analysis of the Limba). The stereotype that

the Baga built in the mangroves helped them maintain their independence *vis-à-vis* other peoples in the past, and is still relevant when analysing current political dynamics. These religious and cultural peripheralisations have parallelisms in many other parts of the continent, especially in places where the Fulbe created theocratic states. However, we still need more comparative data in order to broadly understand how these pre-colonial peripheral formations go into contemporary African political societies, and what role their deep-ruralness plays in the political arena.

7.8. On Baga “culture”: What they do and what they say

In his ethnography, Frederick Lamp has argued that the Baga are in a process of culturally “reinventing” themselves. Put briefly, his thesis would be that after the repressive period of Sékou Touré, in democratizing Guinea, the Baga are revitalizing their oppressed culture. As I have shown in Chapter Six, this point of view raises many questions about notions of culture; not only is it centred on the reified aspects of it, but it actually collaborates in reifying them. As Roy Wagner has put it, the anthropologist “invents a ‘culture’ for people, and they invent ‘culture’ for him” (Wagner 1981:11). I hope to have shown that by looking at practices not oriented towards the display of a cultural heritage we can get a different view about Baga culture. Indeed, this leads us to a two-tier concept of Baga culture, and to the necessity for researchers to combine data from both sides.

In the 1994 football tournament in Mare I saw a woman walking with a long stick in which someone had written “*sna abaka malo - mer*”, which means “we the Baga, rice - salt” (see Fig. 10). To reduce the Baga to “rice and salt” is to give a minimal definition (with a nice gender balance, since rice farming is a masculine activity and salt extraction a feminine one). This is remarkable not only because these two cultural practices have since long ago characterised the Baga, but also because this definition reminds us of the descriptions of themselves that the Baga were giving to visitors already in the early 19th century. It is as though the Baga had developed the *habitus* of portraying themselves as no more than rice farmers and salt extractors. Maybe what this

woman was expressing is that if today the Baga Sitem are “Baga,” it is because they have remembered what being Baga is all about: “rice and salt.”

But what Baga villagers *do* and what their *ressortissants* *say* are not necessarily the same thing. Baga villagers have a practical conception of Baganess, theirs is a Bourdieuan notion of culture as embodied history: Baga is he or she who does what we do, or who wants to learn how to do it (or who does not give up doing it and becomes a *Baga Foté*).

Baga intellectuals, on the other hand, seem to be talking according to a different theory of culture, one that would be closer to the Boasian approaches of Frederick Lamp and other culturalist researchers. To them, Baga “culture” is not practices such as rice farming and salt extracting, but rather masks, historical narratives and intellectual elaborations, together with maps and delimitations of political territories.

I do not want to take sides and say that intellectuals are inventing spurious traditions, or that Baga “real” culture is what people do, not what they say. I think we must look at the interaction between local practices and “culturalist” views in order to understand how the Baga maintain their identity in Guinea today. Yet, I have named this concluding chapter after the phrase displayed by that woman in order to counter-balance the culturalist view and to express that, no matter how appealing notions of “invention of tradition” may be, there is, in the Baga case at any rate, a structural continuity between old practices and new political and ethnic discourses. When discussing the interdependence between the *abol* and the *amanco ngopon*’s cults, André Schaeffner talked about the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine principles in nature and culture, often ritualised in West African masquerades. Historical narratives and football are undoubtedly masculine expressions of Baga culture. But it was a woman who showed to me that if Baga culture and history are to be defined, the goal posts may be widened, but not moved too far away from rice and salt.

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Appendix 1

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MAP 1: REPUBLIC OF GUINEA

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SOURCE: Maps geosystems
Conakry, Republic of Guinea
(Reprinted from Curtis 1996)

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MAP 3:
POPULATION
OF COASTAL GUINEA

SOURCE: Maps geosystems.
Conakry, Republic of Guinea
(Reprinted from Curtis 1996).

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Figure 1



Figure 2

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Figure 3

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Figure 4

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Figure 5



Figure 6

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Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

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Figure 10

Appendix 3

Consulted archives

A. Archives des P.P. du St-Esprit.
12, Rue du P. Mazurié
94669 Chevilly Larue Cedex.
France
Archivist: Père de Banville (†)

1. Box 193 A 13 *Lettres du Père Arsène Mell.*
2. Box 674 A. *Journal de la Communauté du Sacré-Coeur de Boké and Carnets des visites du Père Montels à Binari, Kouffin et Taigbè.*
3. Box 297. *Mission Katako.*
4. Box 296 A and B “Fonds Bernier.”

B. Archives Prefectorales de Boké
Musée de Boké, Boké
Préfecture de Boké
République de Guinée.
Archivist: M. Kaba

Box “Canton Baga”
Folders:
CB 1 Almamy Sidi
CB 2 Amidou Camara (Katako)
CB 3 Salou Camara (Katako)
CB 4 Succession d’Almamy Kande
CB 5 Donat Camara (Katako)
CB 6 Katongoro
CB 7 Kamsar
CB 8 Taïdi
CB 9 Kakilensi
CB 10 Kawass
CB 11 Kouffin
CB 12 Bintimodia
CB 13 Binari
CB 14 M’bottini
CB 15 Missira

C. Archives Prefectorales de Boffa
Préfecture de Boffa
Boffa
République de Guinée
Archivist: M. Sylla

- 1 Box “canton Koba”
- 2 Box “canton Sobané”
- 3 Box “canton Monchon”

D. Archives Nationales de Guinée
BP 617 Conakry
République de Guinée
Director: J. Kaba

ANG. 108 G:Rio-Pongo-Boffa 1906-1907. Confrérie Musulmane, propagande islamique de Tibini Kamara 1906-1907.

Appendix 4

Glossary of the Baga Sitem terms mentioned in this thesis

abanka/cibanka	Ward. Courtyard
abol/bol	Female spirit
acol/col	Medicine
amanco ngopon	Male initiatory spirit
antof/ntof	Village, land, earth
dwuru	Outside. <i>Also</i> : The world
dare/sidare	Village (opposed to dale, rice field)
dabaka	Baga land
danapa	Generation, age group
dale/sidale	Rice field
dembita	Brideservice
daring	Behind. Back of house
deser	Witchcraft
dimba/sidimba	<i>nimba</i> headdress
disre	Inside
dokom	Kinship
dokomene	Kinship link. Brideservice
dorkun	Manhood
dikulum/sikulum	Bush
fum/afum	The person, the individual
kanda/canda	Enclosure
kawe/cawe	Silk-cotton tree
kibere	To enter
kibere acol	A cult (Lit. "to enter medicine")
kikenc	To circumcise. Initiation dance
kidi	To eat
kidi molom	Initiation (Lit. "to eat secrets")
kifen	To sweep. Witchcraft attack on a whole lineage
kiwal/ciwal	Glade or hut in the bush where men meet to drink palm wine
kor/cor	Belly. Lineage
kibok	To cry, to wail. Certain solemn sacrifices
kilo/wolo	House, also lineage
kilo disre	Lineage (Lit. "inside the house")
kilo kipon	Ritual house of each lineage
kigner	To close. Also the ritual "closing of the land"
kusunka/cisunka	Doorway. Lineage
tes/mes	Deed, thing
malō	rice
malō ma baka	semi-floating rice (<i>Oriza glaberrima</i>). Literally: "The rice of the Baga"

malo ma dale	mangrove rice (either <i>O. glaberrima</i> or <i>O. sativa</i>). Lit.: "The rice of the rice fields"
mbita	in-laws (older than ego)
ncoko/anco	Mother's brother
powolsene/yowolsene	Toy. Mask
tomalo	A cult
tolom/molom	Secret. Mask
wanapa/ananapa	Age fellow. Friend
wan/awut	Child
wifula/afula	The Fulbe
wi.baka/abaka	The Baga
wicar/acar	Slave
(wi)fum/afum	see <i>fum</i>
wirok/aro ^k	Sister's son
wirkun/arkun	Man
wiran/aran	Women
wibe/abe	Chief
witabo/atabo	White person
wibeki/abeki	Elder
wilipne/alipne	Elder who has completed the initiation cycle (Lit. "he who has finished")
wilimpis acol	witch-doctor

Appendix 5

Baga groups

It is difficult to ascertain as to how many Baga inhabitants there are in Guinea. I calculated that there are about 18,000 Baga Sitem speakers living in an area with fifteen villages (see below). The Baga Pokur number around 1,500 speakers in the two villages of Minar and Mbotin. Baga (or Bulongic) were calculated at around 6,000. However, to these figures we should add the *ressortissats* who live in Conakry, whose numbers have not yet been assessed. Data on southern groups (Koba, Kalum) is not collated.

N.B. on "Baga Fore". I use the Susu concept of "Baga Fore" to refer to the people who call themselves Bulongic, speaking the cilogic language (unrelated to Sitem). However, scholars must take into account that, in the past, this concept was applied by French and English visitors to the whole of the Baga. Historical documents must therefore be handled carefully. "Fore," with an open "e" (Fore) means "black". With a front "e" it means "old." Whether the concept therefore means the "black Baga" or the "old Baga" (which, incidentally, is also the meaning of "Baga Sitem," and probably of "Temne" as well) is a matter of much contention. In any case, the concept is structurally opposed to "Baga Fore," "white-person Baga". What Maclaud had to say about this concept as early as 1906 may be interesting to recall:

"Baga Fore means in Susu 'black Baga' or 'savage Baga', undoubtedly in opposition to the Baga of the south, more civilized" (Maclaud 1906:39; my translation).

Here are some official population figures (1996) of different Baga villages:

1. Prefecture of Boké

1.1 Sub-prefecture of Kamsar

1.1.1. District of Tolkoc	1,582 (Sitem)
1.1.2. District of Kufen	2,270 (Sitem)
1.1.3. District of Kawass	2,262 (Sitem)
1.1.4. District of Katongoro and Kalikensi	1,898 (Sitem)
1.1.5. District of Kabac (or Missira)	1,684 (Sitem)
1.1.6. District of Minar-Mbotin	1,545 (Sitem)

1.2. Sub-prefecture of Bintimodia

1.2.1. District of Mare	1,932 (Sitem)
1.2.2. District of Katako	2,325 (Sitem)

2. Prefecture of Boffa

2.1. Sub-prefecture of Mankountan

2.1.1. District of Mankountan centre

2.1.1.1. Danci	932 (Sitem)
2.1.1.2. Bukor	1,193 (Sitem)
2.1.1.3. Sibal	585 (Sitem)
2.1.1.4. Kalikse	780 (Sitem)

2.1.2 District of Yampon	
2.1.2.1. Yampon centre	823 (Sitem and Fore)
2.1.2.2. Bongolon	411 (Fore)
2.2. Sub-prefecture of Tounifili	
2.2.1. District of Monchon	
2.2.1.1. Monchon centre	889 (Fore)
2.2.1.2. Mambasso	584 (Fore)
2.2.1.3. Mintani	546 (Fore)
2.2.1.4 Kintaly	270 (Fore)
2.2.1.5 Dibensi	462 (Fore)
2.2.1.6 Nkeren	206 (Fore)
2.2.1.7 Tilponi	99 (Fore)
2.2.1.8 Missira	284 (Fore)
2.2.1.9 Kiffinda	499 (Fore)
2.2.2. District of Diogoya	
2.3.1. Diogoya centre	544 (Fore)
2.3.2. Mantessa	193 (Fore)
2.3.3.Kitiffin	452 (Fore)
2.3.4. Workuya	435 (Fore)